

SCARLET

MAGAZINE

Fall 2023

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of
Baraka

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SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH THE ARTS

WE WANT DANCING TO BE A PREREQUISITE FOR SUCCESS

RAS BARAKA

Editorial

Cantor is our Chancellor

By Anya Dillard



This issue of *Scarlet Magazine* is the first to be published since 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic struck. Therefore, we at *Scarlet* consider it a revival: of our mission, our values and our voices.

The stories that we have chosen to feature here represent the vibrant threads that make up the quilt of Rutgers-Newark and the community it anchors: social justice, scholarship and creative expression. We believe that one person in particular has, more than anyone, served as a prime example of Rutgers' commitment to creative innovation and social impact. That person is Dr. Nancy Cantor, our chancellor.

In August of 2023, Rutgers President Jonathan Holloway announced that Cantor's contract would not be renewed in 2024. In the wake of this announcement, countless Rutgers students, staff and local leaders have expressed their outrage at Cantor's removal as well as their adamant love, respect and admiration for her.

Cantor, who has served as chancellor for nine years, made history as the first woman chancellor at Rutgers-Newark when she assumed the role in 2014. She has since earned a reputation for creating and supporting initiatives that reinforce the importance of social justice and arts education on our campus.

For instance, she spearheaded the establishment of Express Newark, the arts incubator located in the former Hahne's department store that has forged a vibrant synergy between student creatives and community members in the Arts District. At Express Newark, also home to the Paul Robeson Galleries, artists, scholars, and activists collaborate to host gallery exhibitions, urban solutions workshops, and community events centering creative and cultural innovation.

It is because of Nancy Cantor that Rutgers-Newark is an institution that values the arts and social justice, one that encourages its scholars to use their creativity as a tool to build bridges between the Rutgers-Newark campus and the broader Newark community. The pieces in this revival issue of *Scarlet* reflect her commitment to using the arts as a catalyst for positive social change and exemplify what it meant to her for Rutgers to be a true anchor institution.

We consider this issue a tribute to Chancellor Cantor. These stories showcase some of the work that she has inspired since she began her tenure here and reflect her values. Our message to her is that these values live on and will continue to inspire us.

Anya Dillard is a junior majoring in Journalism and Video Production.

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House of Baraka

Newark Mayor Ras Baraka grew up in a household of poetry and social justice, leaving a permanent mark on how he's governed since being elected to the office in 2014

By Anya Dillard

Nearing his first decade as Newark's mayor, Ras J. Baraka uses growing up in an arts-driven, social activist household in setting policy on such tough issues as housing, public safety, education and income inequality. Influenced by his radical parents' attention to racial inequality, he is working for social change from within the established city government, the first mayor in 50 years who's actually from Newark.

A symbol of perseverance, Baraka first ran unsuccessfully for mayor in 1994 when he was 24 years old and won only 8.4% of the vote. Now 53, and well established as a thought leader who's reimagining urban revitalization, he was re-elected for the third time in May 2022 with 83% of the vote.

Scarlet magazine sat down with Mayor Baraka for wide-ranging interview at City Hall about his radical upbringing, its influence on his approach to governing, and the importance of the arts in Newark's rebirth and in creative young people's lives. Not many other mayors can claim also to be a spoken-word poet who appeared on the ground-breaking hip-hop album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998). He's also a husband and father of four children.

Building a career first as an educator and then as a public servant, Baraka's desire to put community first did not come from nowhere. In fact, growing up in a household that was centered around arts and social activism had everything to do with it.



Mayor Baraka speaks during a Hispanic Heritage event at the Newark Museum of Art. Photograph by Jacob Anthony Amaro.



Ras Baraka, mayor of Newark, and other family members seated for a photograph. (2000)
 Photograph by Brinson, Carl | from Newark Public Library Archive.

Family's Artistic Roots

Born in 1970, just a few years after Newark was literally in flames over civil rights and Black liberation, Ras Baraka was raised in a family full of revolutionaries and creatives. His father Amiri Baraka was a widely read poet and author of the iconic 1963 book about African-American music, *Blues People*, published when he was known as LeRoi Jones. The book is the inspiration for a 2024 installation at Express Newark.

Amiri Baraka passed away four months before his son won his first mayoral election on May 13, 2014.

Ras's mom Amina Baraka, 80 years old, has seen her son reelected twice more to his current office. She is also a poet and the founder of the Congress of African People (CAP), a revolutionary nationalist organization that focused on community organization, culture, and advocacy for the liberation of African, Asian and Latin American peoples. Amina also founded several

socio-political and educational initiatives based in the city, including the African Free School, which was literally free (not unlike the taxes-funded public school system), and the National Black Assembly, a Black civil rights organization focused on electoral and community politics.

The mayor remembers being surrounded by activism and reflected on how much those experiences, which included attending his mom's African Free School, shaped his childhood. They propelled him to become an avid reader.

"We had an entirely unique upbringing, which gave me a different perspective," he said. "Art and culture were functions in our daily lives. WBGO, the jazz station, played in my household all day, every day. Artists would come through all the time. We'd host these big events and musicians, visual artists, poets, writers and essayists from all over the world came to my house."

"I watched my father being victimized by police brutality and remember going to court at 10 years old to testify."



Left: Amiri Baraka, literary figure, playwright, activist and poet.
 Right: his son Ras Baraka, mayor of Newark City. (2000)
 Photograph by Brinson, Carl | from Newark Public Library Archive.

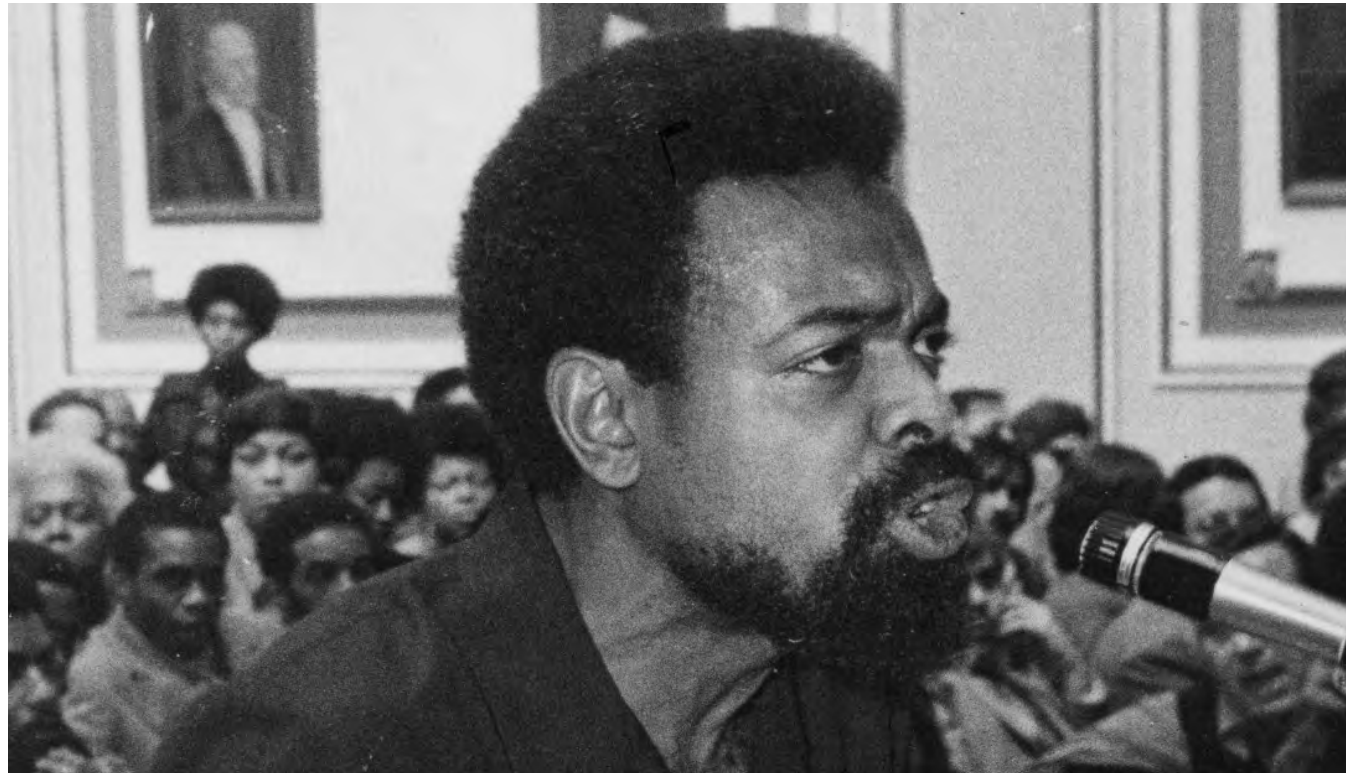
While his parents' backgrounds in the arts helped to turn Baraka's childhood home into a vibrant atmosphere that fostered creativity and self-expression, their beloved city was extremely volatile.

"I watched my father being victimized by police brutality and remember going to court at 10 years old to testify," the mayor said. "My brother was born in 1967 in the middle of the Rebellion. There was a lot of repression from the state. It was a really rough period. As kids growing up in that [environment], it has a traumatic effect on you."

In his audiobook memoir *Book of Baraka* published in 2022 exclusively on Audible, Baraka explains: "My oldest brother went to jail. My youngest brother was shot in the head. My sister was taken from me in violence in my community."

In his interview with *Scarlet*, Baraka reflected on the consequences of such turbulence: "I believe some of my peers – people who I knew who grew up in the movement – are probably divorced from [activism] entirely at this point because of the impact that it had."

But that thinking clearly did not apply to the future mayor, who by 2002 was elected to the Newark Municipal Council, on which he remained through 2006.



Changing the System From Within

Baraka worked in education for more than 20 years before he became mayor. He earned a bachelor's degree in political science from Howard University in Washington, D.C. and a master's degree in education administration from St. Peter's University in Jersey City, N.J. From 2007 to 2013, he served as principal of Newark's Central High School. He left that job to run as the Democratic candidate for mayor and finally succeeded after years of trying.

Audible, an Amazon company headquartered in Newark, is an example of the mayor's strategy to use private/public cooperation to revitalize his community with an arts focus and create local jobs.

"People think that people that hang out downtown are, like, corporate folks, but the folks that are downtown are artists, entrepreneurs, and young Black folks from all over the place. They come into this community and use it as their own

canvas," Baraka said. "And the things that these artists are painting and saying – through their work, through their poetry – drives us socially and democratically to be more inclusive."

The mayor occasionally hosts Newark City Hall open mic nights for poets, making it clear that creating spaces for artistic expression empowers its citizens and also contributes to the long-term development of the city as a whole. Baraka strongly believes that Newark's artists and arts collectives will continue to make an extraordinary impact on the city's socio-political landscape.

The year 2020 challenged government leaders throughout the world, with the COVID-19 health crisis claiming an unprecedented number of lives. Two months later, a new age of Black civil rights took shape after Minneapolis police brutally murdered George Floyd. Baraka's response included replacing a Newark statue of Christopher Columbus in what used

to be known as Washington Park with a monument of Harriet Tubman (see related article on page 16) and renaming the park Harriet Tubman Square.

"We are not erasing history, but completing it," Baraka recalled of his speech at the monument's March 2023 unveiling. "We are not demeaning other people's stories, we are telling our own. The world from our point of view is scary only to those who despise justice."

Other examples of the mayor's post-George Floyd social justice reforms are the massive "All Black Lives Matter" and "End White Supremacy" murals that occupy the main road of Halsey Street. Similar murals can be spotted throughout Newark's Central Ward, highlighting the philosophies of scholars, disruptors and civil rights leaders, all regarded as heroes in his childhood home.

Fast Friends With Lauryn Hill

Baraka was in his early twenties when he first met Lauryn Hill, who came with hip hop legend Sista Soulja to one of his father's backyard parties. Five years younger, Hill was also born in Newark but grew up in nearby South Orange. Soon, her bandmates Wyclef Jean and Pras (who met in high school and formed The Fugees) would also show up.

"When they first were up and coming, they brought the drum set, the guitars, and they rocked in the backyard in an open mic session. There would be 150 young people [in the backyard]," Baraka recalled. "It was wild."

Hill, now 48, took an interest in Ras Baraka's poetry and would attend his readings.

"Lauryn and I became great friends because of the music," Baraka said. "We listened to Nina Simone and Curtis Mayfield. That's the music we loved back then. It became an entry point for us to have a deeper relationship. That allowed her to understand my love for music, writing and poetry."

The Fugees' 1996 breakthrough second album *The Score*, made them superstars, and the future mayor was there at the beginning. He gets a shout-out in the closing credits.

"I just was just a young kid (recent college grad) jamming, not knowing it was going to be like this multi-platinum generational album," Baraka said. "They just blasted the airwaves and created a kind of following for themselves even before, you know, they got on the radio."

Ever since his introduction to Hill and The Fugees, Baraka admired

their uniqueness and determination to remain authentic in their art. "What Lauryn and the Fugees did, they were their authentic selves," he said. "They didn't let people make them believe that what they were doing would not sell. She rapped. She was a lyricist. Lauryn really took R&B and encased it in hip hop. The Fugees would throw their own Haitian culture on top of it."

When Hill decided to go solo, she figured out a way to fit Baraka on her new album. In fact, the first voice on her 1998 solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, is the future mayor's when he was working as an educator. It's Baraka calling the student names for a homeroom roll call with actual Central High School students who attended his school when he was principal.

He reflected on his experience recording the audio for the album in Hill's living room, accompanied by a dozen of his eighth grade students. During the session, Baraka facilitated a socratic seminar where he asked his students to discuss what the meaning of love was to them. His questions and their answers are interspersed through the album.

"Those skits weren't just placeholders," Baraka said. "They became a living breathing part of the album and people remember that. They remember those conversations because those kids were so themselves: bright, youthful and engaged. Young people provide a kind of different energy to everything. Lauryn and I have had many conversations about how those young people carried that album."

"WE WANT dancing to be a prerequisite for success."

WE WANT the blues, jazz, funk, rock, soul, hip-hop, r&b.

And the wealth created from it to be our babies inheritance.

And WE WANT it taught in elementary schools all over the world.

WE WANT to speak for ourselves."

— Poem by Ras Baraka, "What We Want"

Missed Homecoming Concert

On a long-awaited 25th anniversary tour this past fall, Hill of course didn't forget Newark on the itinerary, which turned out to be at the Prudential Center, and also included a reunion with The Fugees for their first New Jersey performance in nearly 27 years.

Was the mayor backstage? No. Duty called; he was representing Newark in Washington, D.C., for a mayors' conference on the night of the concert.

But Baraka said he received a slew of messages from Newark citizens who attended the concert, some containing pictures and videos of Hill's performance. One of those texts was the ultimate blast from the past.

"[Lauryn] actually sent me a text after the show had ended," he admitted. "She told me, 'You represented love on my album. Thank you.'"

Seeing his friend celebrate this milestone on one of Newark's biggest stages deeply touched the mayor. "I needed that," he said. "It was necessary for me personally and it was necessary for all of us. Necessary for me because it gave me hope - that once broken can come back again. And, we needed that light. Remembering that time period in my [early] life was exciting. Lauryn bringing that back, in the midst of all this stuff that we got to do every day, it made me feel like we would change the world."

Anya Dillard is a junior majoring in Journalism and Video Production.

Mayor Baraka in City Hall.
Photograph by Jacob Zion Laster.



Tubman Legacy

Legendary Abolitionist Celebrated in Newark with Monument, Exhibit

By Julie Jang

There is no proof that Harriet Tubman, for eight years a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad, ever set foot in Newark. But after she helped African-Americans escape slavery and find refuge in northern states or Canada in the early to mid-1800s, her advocacy for equal rights remains enshrined in our city.

A monument of the early civil rights activist’s likeness was unveiled in March 2023 at Harriet Tubman Square, where Broad Street meets Washington Street. An accompanying exhibit also opened at the Newark Public Library’s main branch across the street and can be visited by the public through March 2024.

At the monument’s unveiling, Newark Mayor Ras Baraka paid tribute to Tubman’s enduring legacy. “In a country where the overwhelming majority of monuments are testaments to white males, Newark has chosen to erect a monument to a Black woman who was barely five feet tall, but had the visage and power of a giant,” said Mayor Baraka, who commissioned Nina Cooke John, an esteemed Jamaican-American architect, to design the massive sculpture.

“We have created a focal point in the heart of our city that expresses our participation in an ongoing living history of a people who have grappled

through many conflicts to steadily lead our nation in its progress toward racial equality,” the mayor said. “Harriet Tubman Square and its interactive centerpiece sculpture, ‘Shadow of a Face,’ represent our past, present and future.”

Replacing a statue of Christopher Columbus, the Tubman monument features a bigger-than-life likeness of the pioneering activist’s face that can’t be missed at street level. Interactive, despite being outdoors, the sculpture provides an audio timeline of her life, including the voices of Newark native/rapper-actress Queen Latifah, and less known Newark residents, who offer stories of personal liberation and thoughts on why Tubman remains a contemporary inspiration.

“Geography should not be a determining factor to decide whether to name something after her or not because she stood for principles that transcend geographical space,” said James Amemasor, an RU-N political science lecturer.

Accompanying Library Exhibit

“It makes sense that Harriet Tubman never came to Newark because it was not a very abolitionist city. It had a very strong connection to the South and the Southern states’ dependence on the products of Newark,” explained



Professor Amemasor, a member of the New Jersey Historical Society.

Amemasor’s research on “fugitive abolitionists” (also known as “runaway slaves”) in New Jersey from 1777-1808 proved particularly useful for the accompanying Newark Public Library’s free exhibit on the second floor of its main branch on Washington Street. The exhibit is curated by Noelle L. Williams, the director of the African American History Program at the New Jersey Historical Commission.

Along with its focus on Tubman-era resistance to slavery, the library’s installation features imagery captured by Newark photographers focused on contemporary civil rights, highlighting Black activism before and after the Civil War. Newark’s deep historical roots to the Underground Railroad are marked by seven sections of a huge

“Newark has chosen to erect a monument to a Black woman who was barely five feet tall, but had the visage and power of a giant.” – Mayor Ras Baraka

exhibit map. Newark destinations connected to slavery or its abolition include the Plane Street Colored Church, the first designated historic site of the Underground Railroad by the National Park Service, located on what is now Frederick Douglass Field at Rutgers-Newark.

“The role of the church is very crucial,” Professor Amemasor noted. Such houses of worship “were the centers where funds were raised, centers of gaining consciousness about conditions, centers of movements, centers of organization.” Within the map, sites marked in red

designate the anti-slavery movement, while green identify areas that supported slave owners. Places showing both red and green visually mark the existential battle that characterized the U.S.’s first century.

A visitor observed the map’s magnitude while green identify areas that supported slave owners. Places showing both red and green visually mark the existential battle that characterized the U.S.’s first century. “The red and green lines differentiating what parts were for abolitionists and not shows Newark’s geopolitical racial relations,” said Avery Julien, a graduate of Rutgers Newark with a degree in psychology. “It shows what parts of the city are poor and wealthy shown through this exhibit. The

difference in the goals of the city and the goals of the people.”

“It’s good to connect local spaces to this history. Certain stories you hear in school, you don’t connect to your local area,” said Reggie Blanding, the head of the James Brown African American Room of the Newark Public Library. “Harriet Tubman is a distant figure but the Underground Railroad, although seemingly foreign, is connected to Newark enclaves.”

Julie Jang is a sophomore majoring in Political Science and minoring in Journalism.

Photograph by Cesar Melgar, DreamPlay Media.

Still No Justice, No Peace

Newark hip hop pioneer Lakim Shabazz rapping the truth 35 years later

By Samia Jahangiri

In a music scene known for the gold chains, flashy cars and scantily-clad women that buzz around its stars, Lakim Welch is a forefather of hip hop who centers family, faith and service to community as core values.

Better known by his stage name Lakim Shabazz, Welch is a maestro from Newark whose combination of beats and lyrical finesse made him a prominent figure in the early days of hip hop, a genre that turned 50 this year. His work grew out of the intertwined street cultures of Newark and New York City in the '80s and early '90s, and it has a spiritual foundation in both the Nation of Islam and its offshoot, the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths.

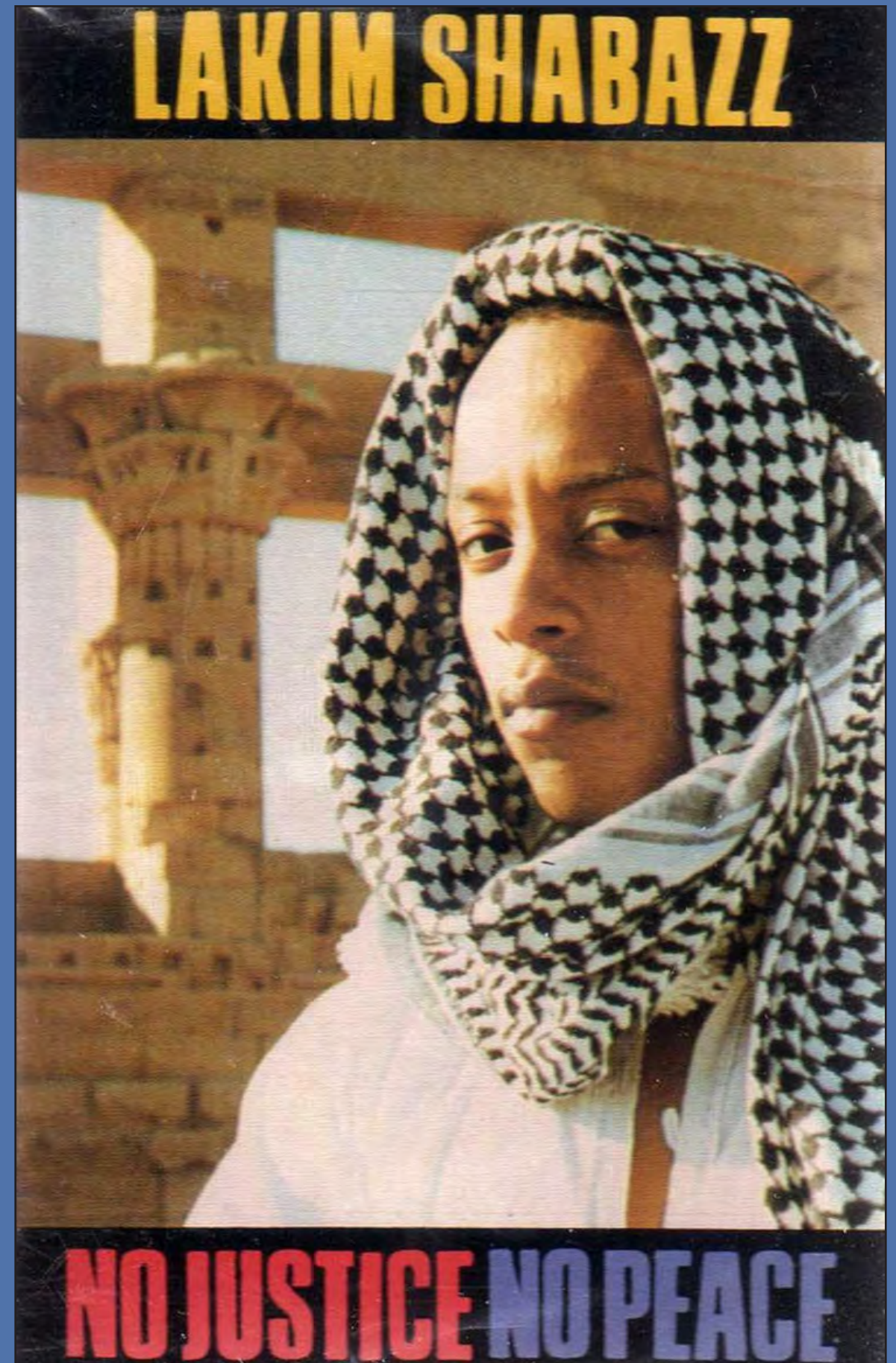
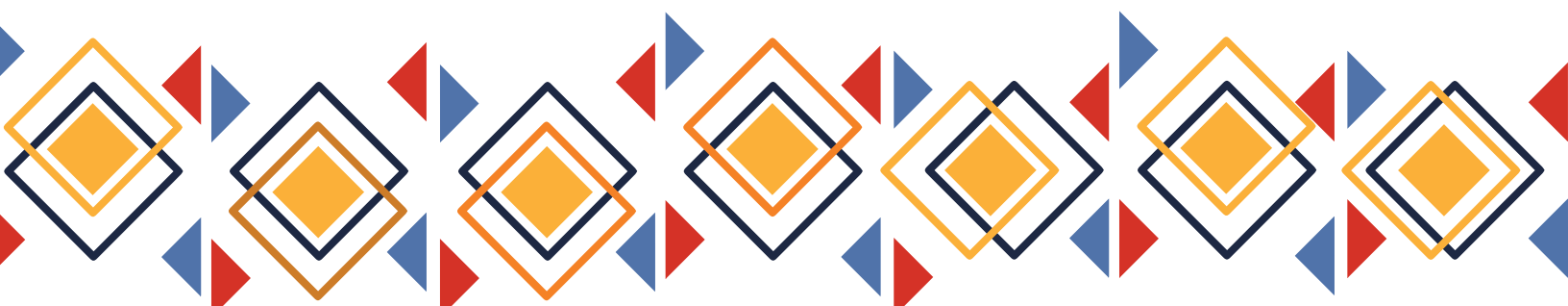
The two Black Muslim groups influenced hip hop from its early days. Renowned artists such as Jay-Z, Rakim and the Wu-Tang Clan incorporate elements of their teachings into their music.

Welch preceded them all. He was one of the founding members of the Flavor Unit, a crew of deejays and emcees based in New Jersey that also launched the career of Queen Latifah. Welch found his way to them through Mark Howard James, known as DJ Mark the 45 King.

When he was a teenager at Arts High School in Newark, taking any opportunity he could to perform in battling crews of MC's, Welch would tune into DJ Mark's music on the *Red Alert* radio show on 98.7 KISS FM.

He revered him. A few years later, when Welch's manager introduced them, he beatboxed a demo that won him a mentor in DJ Mark. Welch describes the original Flavor Unit as family. They collaborated. He even wrote rhymes for Queen Latifah's *Queen of Royal Badness* and *Ladies First*.

“The greatest thing that an artist has is their voice. It’s an influential voice that people listen to. So, why not give people positive solutions?”



Tuff City Records Album Cover.
Courtesy of Lakim Welch.



Lakim Welch's second album, *The Lost Tribe of Shabazz*, spent seven weeks on Billboard's Top 100 R&B/Hip Hop Albums chart in 1990. Courtesy of Lakim Welch.

"I could have come out like any other ordinary rapper talking about regular things: girls, partying, having fun, jewelry," he recalls. "But being a member of the Five Percent Nation, my way of life heavily influenced what I rapped about."

Flavor Unit put out some of the most defining tracks from the early days of hip hop under the Tuff City Records label. They included two albums by Welch that left an impact. Not only did his music resonate deeply with contemporary audiences, but it would also go on to define the sound of a generation of artists and creatives to come. His work was so influential that Eminem name-dropped him in *Rap God*, spitting the bar, "I'm a product of Rakim, Lakim Shabazz, 2Pac, N.W.A., Cube, Hey Doc, Ren, Yella, Eazy."

Welch's debut album, *Pure Righteousness*, came out in 1988, when he was 20. The entire album materialized in a mere two weeks, propelling the young emcee into the

forefront of a golden era of hip hop. It exuded an unwavering commitment to knowledge and truth, and it served as a testament to all that he took away from his educators. "I could have come out like any other ordinary rapper talking about regular things: girls, partying, having fun, jewelry," he recalls. "But being a member of the Five Percent Nation, my way of life, heavily influenced what I rapped about."

His second album, *The Lost Tribe of Shabazz*, dropped two years later. The cover featured an image of him in a dashiki, and he filmed a music video for it in Egypt, floating down the Nile. The album spent seven weeks on Billboard's Top 100 R&B/Hip Hop Albums chart. Its most well-known track, *No Justice, No Peace*, expresses

outrage at the murder of Yusuf Hawkins, a teenager shot to death by a white mob in Brooklyn in 1989, leading to a summer of tense protests and clashes with police. "Fast forward 30 years from then, sounds familiar doesn't it?" Welch reflects. "These things are still happening now. It's like open season on the Black man out here."

Welch was born the year after the uprising in Newark, and he was raised in a one-parent household in a city struggling to recover from death and destruction, riddled with challenges and hardships. When he was in the fourth grade, the television series 'Roots' came out, and its depiction of slavery propelled him on a quest for self-discovery. "My number one question was: 'Why did they do that to us?' No one could answer it. I went to my mother, I went to my grandmother, no one could ever answer these questions," he explains. Black Muslim teachings answered his questions. His uncles, who belonged to the Nation of Islam, guided him. And his cousin led him to the Five Percent Nation, which Welch sees as not just a religion but a way of living.

His upbringing instilled in him a deeply rooted pride in his identity, and with it, a resilience that was fortified by the positive influences he saw surrounding him. "I'm grateful that I had positive people around me, growing up," he says, crediting all but himself. "The environment I grew up in made me tough. I learned a lot of street savvy. Being exposed to the teachings of the Nation of Islam at a young age ... kept me grounded. But I was still tempted by all the trials and tribulations that come with growing up in that kind of environment."

Now a grandfather, his commitment to his family remains unwavering: "A strong family unit is like a powerful fist that can knock down boulders," he says.

His every sentence, eloquent and confident, reflects the depth of his lyrical prowess. Yet he speaks with surprising humility about his life, accomplishments, artistic endeavors, and community work.

These days, Welch works 12-hour days as a supervisor in a hospital and part-time aide for a pediatrician, and volunteers time to his neighborhood. As much as his community in Newark influenced him in his early days, he continues to make an impact on it. A regular guest speaker at the Newark Street Academy, he lectures there on the history of hip hop in Newark. The academy – started seven years ago by Ras Baraka and directed by a member of the Five Percent Nation – helps young people kicked out of high school. Many of them struggle with trauma from physical and mental abuse, teen pregnancy, or gang affiliation, he says, and the program aims to "re-engage them into society" and put them on a path to a high school equivalency diploma. He tells the students: "I know the environment you're in. Yeah, we got gang activity, a liquor store on every corner – greatness can still come out of it."

Welch believes that an artist owes his society: "With everything going on, the rapper's position is to be a voice of change," he says. "The greatest thing that an artist has is their voice. It's an influential voice that people listen to. So, why not give people positive solutions?"

To build on his own legacy as a voice for positive change, and reflect contemporary issues of social justice, he's working on his third album. It will be called *The Understanding*. One rhyme he's playing with: "I speak truth to the lie, to override the genocide / Y'all stay pretty, these cities are being gentrified."

Samia Jahangiri is a senior majoring in Journalism and Graphic Design. Alaa Essafi, a Rutgers-Newark alum, contributed to this story.



Nasiriyah Meets Newark

At Clement's Place, a fusion of Iraqi music, jazz and political protest

By David Horan



Courtesy of Zahra Ali.

Amir El-Saffar's trumpet whispered to the room, and the rest of his band, the Two Rivers Ensemble, slowly pitched in. The tempo drew me in slowly and built to a crescendo that hit my ears like a wave. In the crash of sound, I almost forgot where I was.

I might have been at Clement's Place, a jazz club on the Rutgers-Newark campus, but the music transported me to the Middle East. Onstage, the band opened with a song penned by El-Saffar earlier that very day. It's called *The People of Gaza*.

Timing matters a lot for musicians, and the band was keeping time politically as well as musically. It was a fall evening in late October, 20 years since the U.S. invasion of Iraq –

and two weeks after the most recent outbreak of war between Israel and Palestine. El-Saffar and his band were calling attention to yet another invasion and occupation breaching international law and human dignity in the region.

The Two Rivers Ensemble – named for the two mighty rivers that run through Iraq, the Tigris and the Euphrates – has pioneered a fusion of classical Iraqi maqam music, based in ancient oral traditions and jazz. The resulting brew is fresh, exciting, grounded and moving.

The band features classical Iraqi stringed instruments, such as the oud and the santour, alongside the trumpet, sax, and upright bass

more familiar in the West. The combination makes for a timeless and unique sound, both glittery and smooth, sharp and sweet, a rhythmic trance over an uptempo beat.

The concert was the culmination of an event commemorating the 20-year anniversary of the Iraq War, organized by Rutgers-Newark professors Amir Moosavi, a literary scholar, and Zahra Ali, a sociologist of Islam and my professor. Professor Ali made a surprise performance during the concert, singing traditional, indeed ancient, music from the rural regions of southern Iraq.

"I sang it for the martyrs of Iraq, Afghanistan and Gaza who are experiencing a genocide supported

"I sang it for the martyrs of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Gaza who are experiencing a genocide supported by U.S. tax dollars."

by U.S. tax dollars. It is a tragedy, a crime against humanity," she said, educating me in the traditional music. "The Atwar (singular Tur) are rural music from the south of Iraq which is a region where the inhabitants of the marshes have preserved ancient modes of living around water, fishing, cultivating, raising buffalos, that dates back to Sumerian times."

Professor Ali's late father hailed from Nasiriyah, a city located near the ancient Sumerian city of Ur, which is more than 5,000 years old. It's a city that, in 2003, was vandalized by American troops. Her father was killed in 2006 as a result of the war. "My father knew all the songs of his town of al-Nasiriyah in the south of Iraq," she remembered. "It's a region from which most poets, revolutionaries, singers come from."

Professor Ali learned to sing from Ustad Hamed Al-Saadi, who also performed during the concert at Clement's Place. (Ustad means "teacher" or "master" in Arabic.) Ustad Al-Saadi is the only living person to have memorized the entirety of the Iraqi maqam. The word "maqam" means place in Arabic. The music is a system of modes and melodies with roots stretching back to ancient Mesopotamia. Rutgers-Newark played a role in bringing him to the U.S. after the invasion of Iraq to protect his life.

Ustad Al-Saadi, who now lives in Brooklyn with a "protected artist" status, gently kneaded a set of prayer beads in his hands before he sang.



Courtesy of Zahra Ali.

When he began, his voice carried notes with such force, it almost knocked me out of my chair. I don't speak any Arabic, and I didn't have to in order to be carried along to another world by the Ustad's voice.

There's a startling contrast between the music and the situation surrounding it. I could write at length about the sparkle of the santour, the unique warmth of the oud, and the absolutely masterful work of the upright-bassist and the drummer. The bassist was putting in overtime, brilliantly using the whole neck of the instrument, and each song had a tempo change that would make any drummer's head spin.

And yet my every accolade to musical mastery feels dry – because while music is being played, voices are being silenced. My friends' and fellow students' voices are being silenced. A week after the concert, a handful of students hung a list of names of the Martyrs of Gaza down the spiral stairs of the law school, only to have it removed overnight, they said, by Rutgers police citing fire hazards. In New Brunswick, students who created sidewalk art in support of Palestine found it soon washed away.

Professor Ali spoke of her faith in the power of the arts to spark a desire for justice. "Poetry, music and art can help us go beyond political

correctness, the limits of the political," she said. "It involves the use of our emotions and senses in a different way than a political or academic text. It speaks to our hearts and souls. It is in a way the very expression of our humanity without filters." Professor Ali said the song she performed expresses "ancient and existential sadness, mourning those who departed."

Her song of ancient origin is the sound of sorrow. And perhaps, against the silencing currently happening in the U.S., resistance can also have a sound. The sound of the chants filling the streets in cities coast to coast. The sound of millions marching day in and day out. The sound of an oud and a trumpet, softly recalling a lost and war-ravaged home.

Perhaps resistance is a symphony, in which we can all play our part.

"Poetry, music, and art can help us go beyond political correctness, the limits of the political."

David Horan is a senior majoring in Journalism and minoring in Sociology.

On Radical Compassion

RU-N faculty member Akil Kumarasamy connects disparate people, places and eras in a novel driven by the Sri Lankan civil war

By Thanalini Sivanesan

My parents fled Sri Lanka as a result of the 16-year-long civil war there. They attempted to settle in many different countries but found themselves in America with two children and another on the way. I heard, saw, and lived through the struggles of seeking asylum all my life. Although the war ended in 2009, the lives of the people who fled are still tangled and the lives of those who remained, still tumultuous.

I brought this life experience to reading the novel *Meet Us by the Roaring Sea*, by Akil Kumarasamy, a professor and MFA faculty member at Rutgers-Newark. The novel partly focuses on a group of student nurses in Tamil Nadu, India trying their best during a drought to help refugees from the Sri Lankan conflict. The novel was shortlisted for the Ursula Le Guin Prize, which rewards art that advances ideals such as equity, freedom, and nonviolence. The book moves back and forth between two different eras and two different points of view. There is a dystopian near future, written in the second person, where the main character Aya, an artificial intelligence trainer, is translating a Tamil manuscript. Then there's the story that the Tamil manuscript tells, set in the past, involving the nurses. It's told from the collective point of view, as "we."

As a speaker of Tamil, and the child of Sri Lankan asylees, I was moved by the story of the refugees. What intrigued me about the book was how much Aya and the student nurses, who don't share the same history as the refugees, are affected by their suffering. Their compassion also intrigues Kumarasamy. Her novel explores the concept of radical compassion. I spoke with Kumarasamy about what that might look like in the 21st century.

THANALINI SIVANESAN: *You describe writing as "another way of fasting. You can't eat or talk or listen to anyone. You're silent and alone but in conversation." Did you find the process of writing this book to be isolating?*

AKIL KUMARASAMY: I did write this book during the pandemic, which was a very isolating time, but I think it made me reflect on how connected we are and entangled we are. Because that's a question that came up during the pandemic: How entangled are we? How much is our life connected to someone else's life? How are far away things connected to us? So, I think all these ideas about our interconnectedness really kind of emerge in the book. But I was writing it during the pandemic, so it was also isolating.

Why did you choose to write *Aya*, who finds the Tamil manuscript, as a character with a background that's not Indian or Sri Lankan or Tamil?

AK: Yeah, so the person's identity is kind of ambiguous and also does not align with someone who might potentially translate (a) Tamil text. I think the question is: How do people connect to things that seem very far away and unrelated? And I think that comes to the idea of even thinking about radical compassion. How do we care for someone else, other people who also might be very different from us? How do we care about places and things that don't seem like they're connected to us but they are in some ways? So, I wanted to put all these people and places in conversations in ways that might seem unusual. I also wanted to have, inside one book, people, places and things that don't seem like they belong together.

The main character seems highly aware that translating the manuscript written by Tamil nurses during the war can be problematic. She says: "It has never been translated. And you think maybe that is for the best. Some texts should remain elusive. The girls in the manuscript wouldn't want to immigrate to English." But she does translate the text anyway. Is this an example of white curiosity or radical compassion?

AK: Having this Tamil text translated into English, into the colonial language, poses some issues. ... but there is also an element of deep intimacy and trying to resurrect something that has been lost and trying to bring it back. But there is that kind of colonial gaze that you're playing with in thinking about how things are mined and how things are used by other cultures.

So that exists but, I think for her, especially, there is no point really. This text might get translated and might be read by a small number of people, but she doesn't really gain much from doing this, except on a much more personal level. She's kind of translating without a clear, full purpose. Maybe this translation will get published, but it doesn't necessarily have a career impact for her. So, I think the act itself has this level of purity.

That makes sense, because even Tamil is not a widely spoken language.

AK: Yeah!

Nobody is out here looking for it, even in this hypothetical world.

AK: Yeah, yeah. No one's looking for it, and I think people would probably understand if someone was translating something from Sanskrit, because there is more familiarity with it in the cultural and literary landscape as an ancient and spiritual language. Both Sanskrit and Tamil are classical languages in South Asia, but because Tamil is also a spoken language, people are not as familiar with it being an ancient language as well. Studying Tamil might feel more unusual.

As the story progresses, we are given different definitions of radical compassion. What would you say is the best holistic definition of the term?

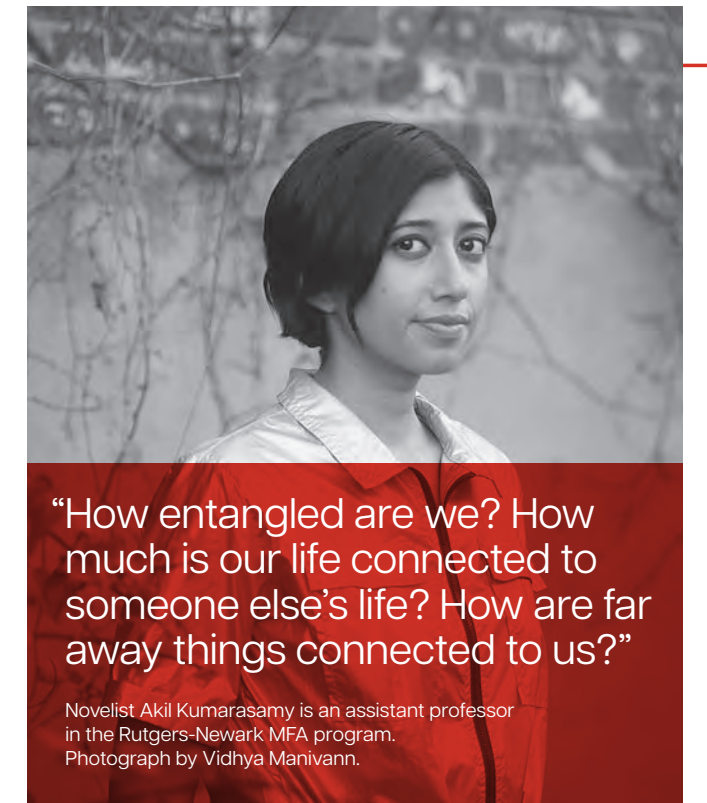
AK: For this group of young female medical students, they are on the tip of Tamil Nadu, and they are also living through a drought, so they are also deeply suffering. One of the questions I had is: How do you care about others when you yourself are suffering? While they are going through this drought, all these refugees are coming onto the island. So, what do you do when you also have very

limited, stripped-down resources? I was interested in seeing how this group of young women imagine into that space and try and think of another way of existing and engaging with the world.

The book showcases the existence and sometimes the lack of radical compassion in the past and in this futuristic world. How do you think radical compassion exists or could exist in the 21st century?

AK: The book jumps between the near future and also this translated manuscript from the 1990s so it's using the future and also the past as sort of a metaphor for the present moment. There is also this big theme of televisions and this idea of viewing other people's pain through this sort of screen. It is to realize, in some ways, how entangled we are... the fires in the rainforest, in the Amazon, are going to have an impact on us too. I'm trying to think of our lives in a much larger way.

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.



"How entangled are we? How much is our life connected to someone else's life? How are far away things connected to us?"

Novelist Akil Kumarasamy is an assistant professor in the Rutgers-Newark MFA program. Photograph by Vidhya Manivann.

Thanalini Sivanesan is a senior majoring in English and Urban Education.

Camera Latino

The Newark Public Library's exhibition of work by Latino photographers provides a counter-narrative to hate

By Jacob Anthony Amaro

As much as it can bring us together, spoken language can tear us apart. The Tower of Babel fell when laborers could no longer understand each other. In modern times, we witnessed the near collapse of American democracy because the language former President Donald Trump and his voters spoke – the language of hate – was divisive.

An exhibition at the Newark Public Library – *Imagenes Sin Palabras* – points to the medium of photography as one means of communicating meaningfully without the risks that speech poses. The featured work creates a counternarrative to hateful representations of Latinos pervasive in our society. The photos show that Latinos have been and will continue to be vital to Newark.

One image, Juan Giraldo's *Rosary'd Hands (Mom)*, stood out. A pair of hands, brown and wrinkled, holds a rosary, the cross hanging in front. Giraldo uses a shallow depth of field so that only the hands and rosary are in focus while everything else is blurred. The hands remind me of my *abuela*, (my grandmother.) "From a young age, my *abuela* impressed upon me the importance of the rosary. "Tiene que ser tu arma," she'd tell me. (It needs to be your weapon.) To this day, I keep a rosary with me everywhere I go.

The exhibit is part of the library's annual Latino Celebration organized by the New Jersey Hispanic Research and Information Center.

The celebration began in the 1980s as a week-long event to recognize the growing Latino community in Newark. Over time, however, it grew. Now, it is three months long. The celebration usually features a theme or exhibit supplemented with free public programming.

This year's exhibit features the work of 11 Latino photographers from New York and New Jersey, whose approaches range from reportage to portraiture. It also incorporates archival photography. The programming highlights Latino presence in the arts, featuring novelists, filmmakers, photographers and other creatives.

Several of the images challenge narratives that I had internalized at a young age. Chelsea Miranda's *Bandera*, taken in 2021, shows a Latina proudly raising her flag, partly draped over her back. The use of black-and-white adds mystery to the photo. Without color, I couldn't tell which flag it was. Archival images portray Latinos in happy circumstances; one is a family portrait, another, an action shot of a man and woman lost in dance, smiling from ear to ear.

Growing up, I thought being Latino was a curse. My white teachers would warn my classmates and me (we were mostly Black and brown) about the perils of a life without an education for people like us. "If you don't want to end up like them

referring to a classmate or kid who had dropped out), you better stay in school and push yourselves," they'd say. They probably thought they were doing the right thing by scaring us into staying in school. But, in reality, they were teaching us it wasn't possible to escape our situation – that we lived in a world dominated by a system that would always oppress us.

In this version of the world, people like me couldn't smile. People like me belonged on the streets. People like me were, and would always be, illegal immigrants, criminals, drug dealers. In this world, which looks a lot like Trump's world, we were a problem, the only solution to which was a wall. While the rhetoric in our country paints Latinos in the ways described above, the photos in this exhibit reminded me that we are people. We smile. We laugh. We cry. We feel. We think. We exist. And we're not going anywhere.

The photos document our enduring presence, resistance and adaptation. In *Gladys Grauer Preparing for Service*, Manuel Acevedo captures Grauer sitting in a chair as a hairdresser does her hair. It isn't anything else or anything more – but it's a photo that lets us know Grauer was here. In *Libertad*, Chelsea Miranda captures a man holding up a sign that says, *La libertad se pelea! Cuba 'pa la calle*. (Liberty is fought for! Cuba to the streets.)

"From a young age, my *abuela* impressed upon me the importance of the rosary. 'Tiene que ser tu arma,' she'd tell me. It needs to be your weapon."

Imagenes Sin Palabras features the standout image *Rosary'd Hands (Mom)*. Photograph by Juan Giraldo.



While most of the images speak for themselves, some require additional explanation to understand the full significance of what they portray. For example, to understand the photo, a contribution by William Sanchez, you need the context that Newark wedding venues once refused to serve the Latino population. Barred, Latinos celebrated instead on rooftops. This photo depicts one such improvisation. In it, a man and a woman pose with a small child, with a bride partly obscured in the background. The child, hands stiff at his sides, frowning, was Sanchez, a pioneering Puerto Rican activist in Newark, who served as the executive producer of *Images/Imagenes*, the longest-running Latino community program in PBS's history.

In selecting photographers for the exhibition, the curator, Cesar Melgar, a Newark-based photographer, said he wanted to feature a broad

range of Latino photographers, both emerging and established professionals, from the metro area. He said the exhibition was important because it featured Latino photographers exclusively.

Melgar noted the sense of community these photographs has helped generate. During the opening night, a few older women approached him to say that they felt represented by the photos.

"We still have a long way to go when it comes to representation of our people," Melgar said. "There's a lot of equally-as-important [Latino] photographers who [are left out of] the overall mainstream conversation."

The exhibition is on view through December 31.

Jacob Anthony Amaro is a senior majoring in Journalism and minoring in Latina/o Studies.

Two portraits by Anthony Alvarez, a Newark-based photographer, hang over a stairwell leading to the *Imagenes Sin Palabras* exhibit. Photograph by Jacob Anthony Amaro.



This *Imagenes Sin Palabras* photo stands as a powerful symbol of Newark's troubled past with racial discrimination. Courtesy of William Sanchez.

Recycled Into Art

RU-N embraces “Eco-Art,” turning ecological crises into opportunities to create

By Kenneth Weiss

The Rutgers students didn't know what to make of the things on the table before them, things they had collected themselves: fallen leaves, brown paper bags, pieces of junk mail, caution tape, and plastic bags. Cut the trash into the shape of leaves, Professor Alexandra Chang instructed. Her students murmured and started to snip, shape, and trace the garbage into oak, elm, and hazel leaves.

The purpose of this exercise, during a class in October, was to expose students to Eco Art and involve them in it. Eco Art sheds light on the impact of humans on the environment. Chang has taught several courses devoted to the subject at Rutgers Newark, including Eco Art 1 and 2 and Global Eco-Art Activism.

Anne Percoco, a Jersey City-based sculptor with an MFA from Rutgers-New Brunswick, joined the class making leaves out of garbage. Her work often involves crafting junk materials into works of art displayed in traditional settings, such as galleries. She needs the leaves created by the students for *HEAP*, a work in progress. She is building a giant pile of these ‘trash leaves’ for an exhibit in Jersey City next summer.

The Environmental Protection Agency says that up to 75% of all waste can be recycled, but only 30% is. According to the EPA, only 58

percent of paper and cardboard are recycled, and only 9% of all plastic is. Percoco defines eco-art as a form of activism because it aims to spark discussion and get people to think about and question our impact on this planet.

“It’s about the environment and the relationship of humans to other species,” she says.

Percoco says that she believes that eco-art reflects a cycle. Something like a piece of junk mail, for instance, has a lifespan beyond its use and purpose for humans. It starts as a tree, then it is turned into paper, then bought by an advertising company, and printed and mailed.

“Where does it go after we use it for its intended purpose, to trash or recycling?” she asked. “How long is it around after you’ve used it? What effect does it have on everything?” She says: “Think beyond the human, think beyond us, into the environment.”

Eco Art’s origins date back to the 1960s and 1970s, when the environmental movement and concerns about climate change first took wide hold in society. These earliest works were not viewed in art galleries, nor made from traditional mediums like paint and clay. They were located

in nature and made from nature. In 1969, for example, in the piece *Double Negative*, Michael Heizer created a man-made trench in a Nevada desert, and in 1970, in the piece *Spiral Jetty*, Robert Smithson created a 1,500-foot-long spiral made of rocks, salts, and mud off the shore of the Great Salt Lake.

Chang and her students are working on a project with Professor Amanda Thackray to observe the water in the Passaic River. The lower 17-mile portion of the river, starting around Newark, is filthy. There have been several efforts in the past few years to clean it, but it is still one of the most polluted rivers in the nation. Chang describes the state of the river as hard to get to and hard to see due to all the pollution.

“The water was dangerous because of the churning of materials in it,” she says. “We were actually not supposed to touch the water. We looked at things. We saw the plastics and microplastics in the river.”

Chang’s other student-led projects include the Eco Art Salon, which previously created a healing garden. Its goal was to get people thinking about green spaces.

“Eco-art is a form of activism because it aims to spark discussion and get people to think about and question our impact on this planet.”

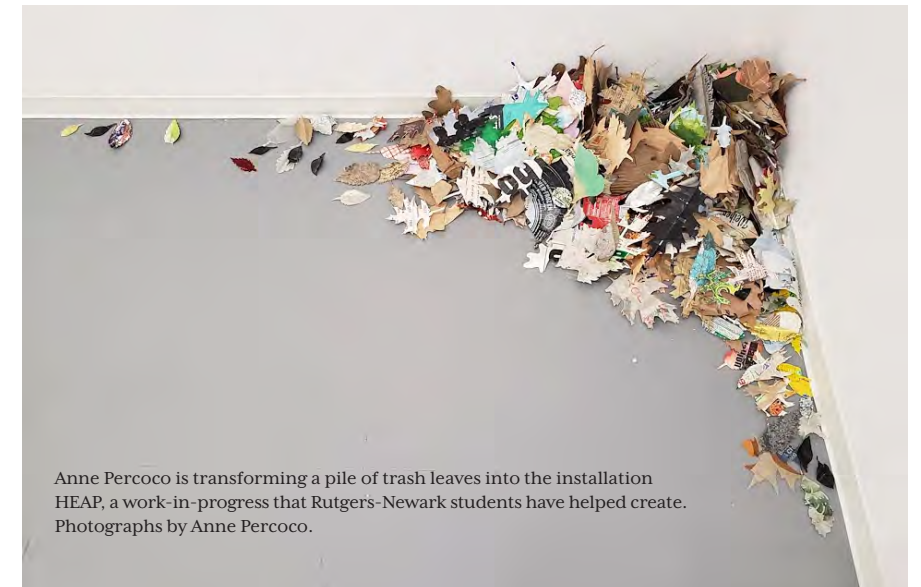
Eco Art doesn't have to result in a tangible piece of work. It can be as much about the process of reflecting on our relationship with our environment as it is about creating any lasting physical product.

Chang has also partnered with the New York Public Library on a project called Newark Futures. The idea is to have community discussions led by students, professors and artists on current environmental issues. They meet every second Thursday of the month at the library (except for January and February). She also organized an event called Communities Joining Forces, co-sponsored by the Humanities Action Lab based at Rutgers-Newark. Held at Express Newark in late October, it highlighted the disproportionate struggles with pollution in lower income communities of color, including those in Newark.

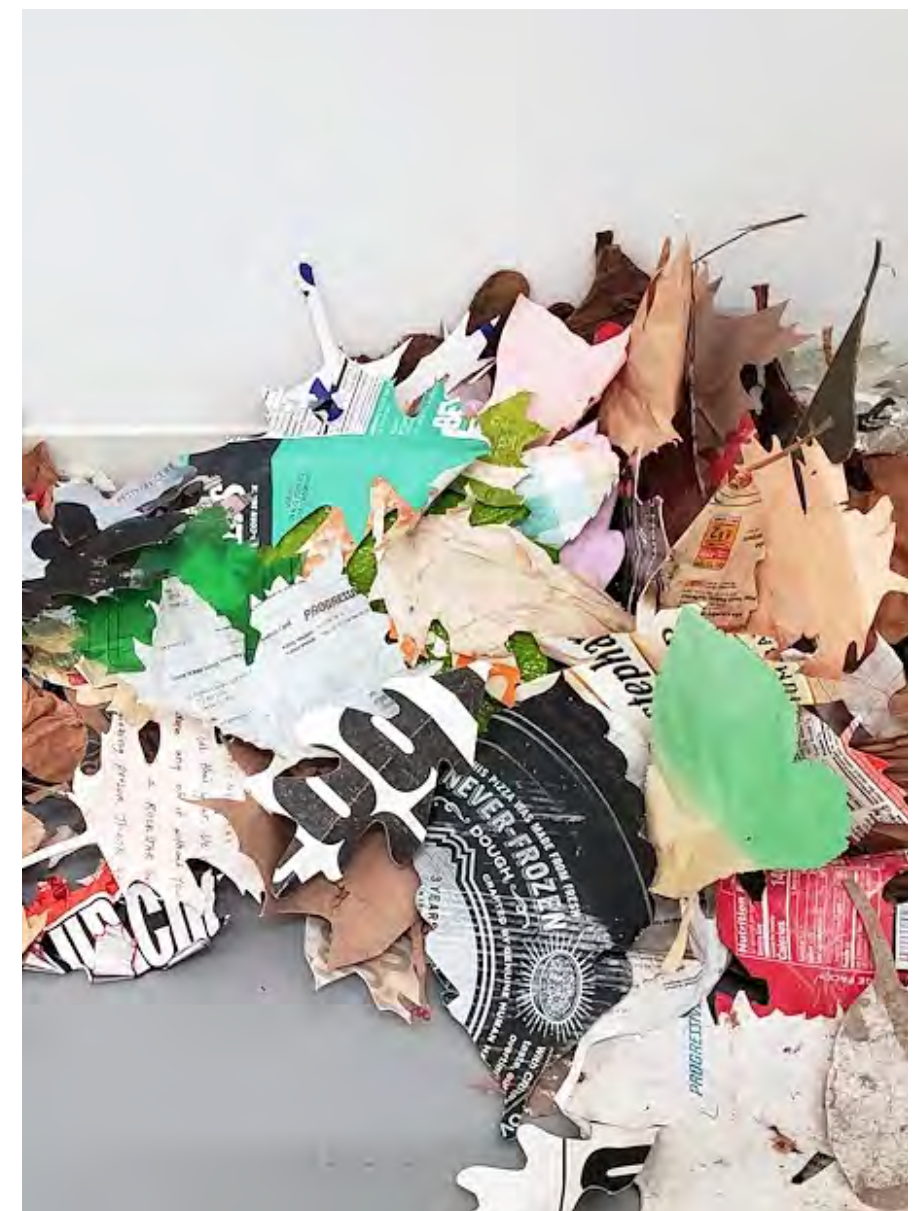
Back in the classroom, as Professor Chang’s students craft their leaves for *HEAP*, they discuss their schedules and classes. Breaking through the everyday chatter, someone says: “This [leaf] came out kinda good.” Another, eyeing their own mock leaf, adds: “This looks cool.”

They are part of the process, working together to create Eco Art, by making something new out of what we throw away and thinking about our impact on the environment.

Kenneth Weiss is a senior majoring in Journalism and minoring in English.



Anne Percoco is transforming a pile of trash leaves into the installation *HEAP*, a work-in-progress that Rutgers-Newark students have helped create. Photographs by Anne Percoco.



Sustainable Couture

Newark-based fashion designer Marco Hall uses “ethically sourced” materials to make clothing worn by superstars like Rihanna.

By: Naim Ali-Pacheco

On bustling Halsey Street, one shop stands out from the rest. Bright yellow dresses in the window and a banner with the owner’s face on it grab the attention. Inside MH302, 90’s R&B and an assortment of dresses and jackets in various colors and patterns greet the visitor. Clothes cover almost every inch. Down a narrow hallway sits a workshop layered with fabrics from floor to ceiling and also stocked with a wall of threads, gold trophies and other accolades, drawings of designs, and the tools of the trade: scissors and a sewing machine. It’s where the magic happens.

The man who makes it happen is none other than Marco Hall, a Newark-raised designer and an esteemed figure in the fashion industry. He has made clothes for Rihanna, Alicia Keys, and Erykah Badu. His designs have been featured at New York Fashion Week, in “Sex and the City: The Movie” and Target X, Vogue, Vibe, Vixen, and Rouge Paris. On the Rutgers-Newark campus, he has been collaborating with visual artists to create wardrobe exhibitions at the SHINE Portrait Studio at Express Newark.

What Hall is known for is his custom-tailored, one-of-a-kind, handcrafted statement pieces – an approach that also makes him an eco-friendly designer committed to sustainability.

Hall explains that his process not only ensures a perfect piece but also creates much less waste than when clothes are mass-produced. His clients come with their own ideas and visions. Because they are involved in every step, from choosing the material to shaping the design to fitting, they get exactly what they want. Every piece is created with care and thought, and they are meant to last.

“You want quality, and quality means sometimes you have to go back to the old,” Hall says. “Nowadays things are fast, fast, and it doesn’t last as long.”

When massive factories use machines to create clothing, there are bound to be mistakes, and those mistakes eventually end up in a landfill. The clothes that do make it to consumers, especially if they are cheaply made, can break or rip and end up in a landfill. The cheaper the clothes, the less care the consumer takes. Hall gives the example of jeans: An ordinary pair of jeans might cost anywhere from \$20 to \$100 and can be easily replaced, while a pair of high-quality, custom-made designer jeans might cost thousands but would likely be valued and used for as long as possible. He also makes sure not to waste fabrics. He buys only what is needed to create a piece, and he only cuts fabrics by hand, eliminating the errors that a machine might make.

Hall uses eco-friendly materials, such as cotton, hemp, and, especially, recycled textiles. Even ethically sourced materials, such as cotton and polyester, can be discarded by mistake and end up in a landfill. By upcycling and recycling, Hall aims to minimize the ecological impact of his creations and give new life to something that others would throw away. This is a skill (and a values system) that Hall has carried since he was young, thrifting clothes, cutting them up, and giving them new life and a new meaning.

Sustainable fashion is more than just a trendy term; it represents a movement that is reshaping our perception of clothing and its environmental impact. What sustainable fashion aims to do is to reduce the environmental impact of creating clothing and textiles.

The movement started in the 1970s with the hippies rejecting mass production and consumerism for handmade and second-hand clothing; they even published a counter-culture eco-guide called *The Whole Earth Catalog*.

The movement began with consumers but grew to involve producers and even the government. Governments started considering how clothing and textiles affect conservation at a United Nations conference in 1992. Today, four states – California, Oregon, Colorado, and Maine – have implemented laws mandating Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), which places the responsibility for end-of-life products on the producer, and 11 other states have introduced legislation calling for EPR.

Even corporations are doing their part to help reduce the amount of textiles and clothes that go to landfills. Brands such as Patagonia and Esprit began weaving sustainability into their practices in the 1980s, by donating sales to environmental groups and running ad campaigns urging consumers to consider the effects of consumption on the environment.

Today sustainable fashion takes on many forms. One affordable and accessible option is thrifting. Not only are there more and bigger thrift stores, but thrifting has moved to e-commerce with niche sites such as Depop and Poshmark and more niche sites such as The RealReal, catering to designer authentication. A more expensive option would be getting your clothes custom-made by sustainable fashion designers such as Marco Hall.

“You want quality, and quality means sometimes you have to go back to the old. Nowadays things are fast, fast, and it doesn’t last as long.”



Marco Hall sewing together a new dress in his workshop. Photograph by Naim Ali-Pacheco.

There are obstacles to advancing sustainable fashion. Custom-made clothes can carry a high price tag. Many people still aren’t fully aware of the impact that the fashion industry has on the environment and society. And second-hand stores regularly throw away clothes and textiles, according to Helpsy, a company that says it has diverted 31 million pounds of textiles and clothing from landfills to be reused.

Its chief of staff, Lisa Scianella, says: “Thrift stores really only sell about 25 percent of what they get, even big ones like Salvation Army and Goodwill. Right off the bat 50 percent of their donations are not good enough to make it to the floor, and then out of the 50 percent someone deemed, ‘Yes, this is good enough,’ 50 percent don’t sell in two weeks. So, they take them off the floor because they’re stale.”

Despite the challenges, Hall is filled with optimism about the future of sustainable fashion. He predicts that the industry will witness growth as

awareness spreads and consumers become more discerning. He expects that more and more brands will adopt sustainable practices throughout their supply chains.

“We are still in the baby stages of change, but people are catching on to what fast fashion is,” he says. “So, I think once we get off the baby stage of it, then we can see the bigger picture of sustainability and upcycling clothes.” He expresses faith that more and more people will see the value of a slow fashion ecosystem and that designers, brands, suppliers, and consumers will collaborate to build it.

Naim Ali-Pacheco is a junior majoring in Journalism.

Ancestral Muse

Express Newark's Artist-in-Residence Adama Delphine Fawundu's mixed media output incorporates the African diaspora and the universe

By Isaiah Bristol



Installation view, *In the Spirit of Áse*, The Newark Museum of Art, 2023. Photograph by Richard Goodbody.

Photographer and visual artist Adama Delphine Fawundu, currently an artist-in-residence at Express Newark, was born in Brooklyn and her ancestors hailed from Sierra Leone and Equatorial Guinea. Her current Newark Museum of Art solo exhibition, *In the Spirit of Áse*, testifies to the multi-generational family ties harking back to Africa at the center of her creations.

Fawundu explains that “Áse” (pronounced AH-SHAY) “means being rooted in a rich ancestry ... It’s even beyond ancestry, like an energy that just cannot be broken, that roots us to the beginning of time and [represents] our ultimate power. That’s what Áse is.”

In her own work, the spirit of Áse moves through her connection to her grandmother, her father’s mother, a textile worker who led communities of women in Sierra Leone. They share the same first name. Fawundu also incorporated her grandmother’s fabric designs into her artwork. Although Fawundu met her namesake only twice, she has deeply influenced the artist’s work.

“I’m connected ... not only by name,” Fawundu says. “Her blood is moving through my blood. It’s the symbolic relationship between me and her and the African diaspora.”

Fawundu’s presence quickly has been felt in Newark. Working from a studio in the Newark-based arts nonprofit Project for Empty Space she has produced community-engaged projects that communicate a distinct

visual language. Whether using a paintbrush or a camera, she tells stories about identity and culture through time, space, and nature.

“These [pieces] make me who I am,” Fawundu says.

The artwork reflects her beliefs about the origin of the universe, beliefs based in her heritage. She says: “In all of the work, I think about the cosmogony associated with my ancestors living through my body. I am really interested in the idea of ancestor memory living through our bodies ... this cycle between past, present and the future.”

In the Spirit of Áse contains an audio portion called *Palii - Seat of the Ancestors*. Her goal is for viewers to connect to the piece through aural frequencies. “Sound elements are very important to the work too,” she explains, “because sound can travel through our bodies, or travel through walls.”

Such a sensory elixir, she says, reflects “energy encompassing this earth in many places at the same time. Just as we are one and many at the same time, like we’re breathing the same air and we have that water in us. We’re literally a manifestation of many, many, many, many things.”

Through her work, Fawundu is relating to people who could be just like her. “I think of myself as a symbol for a collective community of people, who we are as people from the African diaspora,” she says.

Artist-In-Residence

Professor Nick Kline, co-director of Express Newark and director of the Shine Portrait Studio, pointed out that the Artist-in-Residence’s considerable talent has been involved in multiple projects through the campus and community. They include a mural made with Rutgers-Newark’s BOLD Leadership Scholars and a wardrobe installation for SHINE that will be installed for a year, in partnership with local fashion designer Marco Hall (see related article on page 32).

From Africa to the Bronx

Her own life experiences have impacted her art. She taught for 10 years at public schools in the Bronx, where hip hop got its start 50 years ago. She got her own start as a photographer in the 1990s documenting hip hop culture in New York City.

Working in public education schooled her in racial inequality. “You know what the inequalities are,” Fawundu says. “We know people are brainwashed between this school and prison pipeline. As a teacher, I did everything to break that.”

Building on that instinct, her art continues that work.

Fawundu hopes that her work helps people to become the best versions of themselves. “We live in a society that creates these labels and places them on people. Sometimes those labels are so narrow,” she says.

Fawundu views her work as a success if, when people look at her work, they find connections within themselves and do not get discouraged by naysayers. “We live in a huge world and thought is expansive and abundant, so why should we be limited in the way that an oppressive eye sees us?”

Fawundu’s exhibition, her contribution to the museum’s Arts of Global Africa wing, will remain on view through March 10, 2024.

“I am really interested in the idea of ancestor memory living through our bodies...this cycle between past, present, and the future.”



Installation view, Adama Delphine Fawundu, *Gifts from Tingoi 1 - 7*, 2022-2023. Photos by Richard Goodbody

Installation view, Adama Delphine Fawundu, *Palii - Seat of the Ancestors and Water Spirits*, 2022-2023. *In the Spirit of Áse*, The Newark Museum of Art, 2023. Photograph by Richard Goodbody.



“I think of myself as a symbol for a collective community of people, who we are as people from the African diaspora.”

Isaiah Bristol is a senior majoring in Journalism and minoring in Africana Studies.

FORM AND COLOR ARE HIS LANGUAGE

Layqa Nuna Yawar expresses indigenous, migrant and Black struggle and identities through vivid murals

By Sara Shaalan

Portrait of Layqa Nuna Yawar in his Newark artist's studio. Photograph by Simbarashe Cha.



When Layqa Nuna Yawar emigrated from Ecuador, at the age of 14, he couldn't speak English. Yawar flew to the U.S. with his mother in 1998. He was reunited with his older brothers and sisters, his grandparents, and a dozen aunts and uncles. Although he had a big family in New York and New Jersey, he still felt isolated in a foreign and new environment.

He had a summer to start learning English before he started his first year in high school. It was a traumatic experience. Art was what allowed him to communicate, despite the language barrier. Whenever he felt alone, he would draw.

"I was afraid of not fitting in. That's how I came into my artistic self, just by dealing with all of that."

A Rutgers graduate who lives in Newark and a lecturer in the Department of Arts, Culture and Media, Yawar recently won a prestigious residency at the Project for Empty Space, a diverse artistic organization based in downtown Newark. Its mission, co-director Jasmine Wahi says, is to "support artists and communities through artwork that promotes social change and social discourse."

At the Project for Empty Space, he's currently working on a mural in collaboration with another artist. They were commissioned by *Make the Road New York*, an immigrant rights nonprofit organization. The mural, which depicts a peaceful protest calling for equal rights, will be installed at the organization's headquarters in Queens.

In his work, Yawar, who describes himself as a multidisciplinary storyteller and public artist, explores themes of social change and freedom and his own identity as an immigrant and indigenous person. His first



Yawar's mural-in-progress for *Make the Road*, New York, in his Newark studio. Photograph by Sara Shaalan.

name, Layqa, means "spirit" in the Kichwa-Kañari community in Ecuador that he comes from.

He invented the name to honor this background. "When I see myself, I see like a mixture of colonialism and indigenous people," he says. "So, I created this art persona, to speak about that."

In one gigantic mural, 350 feet long, which he painted for Terminal A at Newark Liberty International Airport, he portrays famous jazz musicians and ordinary immigrant workers and activists for social change. All have connections to New Jersey, and all are painted in the warm, vivid colors that he likes to use. It wasn't an easy road to this kind of success.

His mother always supported his interest in drawing and took him to art classes when he was young, but it took some work for Yawar to decide to become an artist while in college.

"When I was a freshman in college, I thought I was going to major in psychology or, you know, be a good immigrant kid that was supposed to get a job, make a lot of money, or be a lawyer or doctor," he remembers. "So I was like, okay, I guess I can do psychology because I'm interested in it."

To survive while making art after graduating from the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers-New Brunswick, he worked in factories as well as taught. While working those jobs, at the end of the day, he would draw and paint. He made murals for free or almost free.

"I kept making murals for long enough that museums and galleries wanted to feature me," he says. But that's not why he painted them. He did it because it is his language, his way of communicating and being less alone.

"When I see myself, I see a mixture of colonialism and indigenous people. So, I created this art persona, to speak about that."

Sara Shaalan is a sophomore minoring in Journalism.

Pofa Ink

Peek into the world of an RU-N senior, Ashanti Haley, whose art – art already praised by *The New York Times* – hangs all over Newark

By Anya Dillard



Ashanti Haley showing off handmade earrings from her Primaries jewelry collection. Photographs by Zion Laster.

Pofa Ink, a visual artist whose illustrative pieces were recently displayed at the 2023 Newark Arts Festival, makes lasting impressions on everyone who views her work. Displayed at Express Newark, the 3 Gateway Center, Bunkr. and elsewhere, Pofa Ink's work has graced art gallery spaces throughout the city of Newark.

Her sculpture "Fraternal Twins: Twins, Placenta, Mother" – built from two deconstructed vintage

portable hair dryers – was even cited by *The New York Times* as "one of the most successful works on view" from Willie Cole's 2022 "Perceptual Engineering" exhibition at Express Newark.

The artist created her own alias from an acronym of the phrase "Pieces of Fine Art," but while Pofa Ink is her artistic persona, the community knows her as Ashanti Haley. A senior at Rutgers University-Newark, Haley is finishing up a double

major in fine arts and Africana studies, as well as a double minor in art history and social justice via the Honors Living Learning Community.

Originally from Linden, N.J., Haley first fell in love with art when she was just four; talent is in her DNA. "My dad was an artist himself," she said. "I would always beg him to draw me and one of the core memories of my life is him telling me to sit in the window that lit my bedroom so he could see the shadows on my face and draw me appropriately." Haley's father went on to illustrate the many nuances of her face, from the braids in her hair to the beads that adorned them.

She was amazed at how he managed to capture her favorite parts of herself with just a pen and paper. "That really set forth the foundation for me to go after this as a career," she said.

One of Haley's primary goals as a creative has been to decolonize arts institutions. A number of Haley's works recall growing up as a young black girl in a traditionally Caribbean household, such as *Conversations with My Black Body*, a collection of photographs that comment on our modern hyper-sexualized society.



"I felt myself being hyper-aware of how men, and even women, perceived my body as a young child," she explained. "I felt uncomfortable and ashamed of my body at times. I felt responsible for the way that I was being perceived and so I shrunk myself in a lot of ways to make myself seem more like a child."

Haley found creating *Conversations* to be a personal "extraordinary healing" experience, but that wasn't her only goal for the series.

"It was also about opening up a larger conversation about the hyper-sexualization that young black women face, what it does to our self esteem, awareness, our comfortability with our bodies, and how those things carry into our adulthood," Haley said.

A followup project entitled "*Conversations with my [blank] body*" resulted from Haley speaking to women from diverse cultural backgrounds about their personal stories and the experiences that shaped their relationships with their bodies.

Through self-exploration and the teachings of Ms. Ferenda, her junior-high art teacher, Haley learned about art methods such as zentangle and how artists such as Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Andy Warhol and Amedeo Clemente Modigliani expanded what her own creations could encompass.

"Being exposed to these artists vastly transformed my idea of what art could be," Haley explained. "Before, my idea of art was encapsulated by very representational works. While I appreciated them, I did not see myself creating work like that."

Discovering Haring's work, in particular, nurtured her creative journey. "He really showed me that art can inspire joy, and that's something that I want to produce in my work. When people see my artwork I want them to feel joy."

Haley is known for her vibrantly stylized illustrations, paintings, photography and sculpture. She utilizes a combination of architectural, geometric and



"Tammy's Silhouette/Control" in Conversations with my [Blank] Body: Architectural Silhouettes (2022). Piece by Ashanti Haley.



“Whenever my work has been referred to as ‘Black art,’ it has always been in a sub-categorical context. I can’t just be seen as an artist, my race has to be mentioned as well.”

anamorphic shapes, silhouettes, and landscapes to represent what she describes as the “Inner scaffolding” of her “inner child” – a part of herself that she feels she’s become intentional about getting to know better over the past three years. “A lot of the work I create is about rebuilding a foundation, or a body, that I can comfortably live in; rebuilding a safe space and redefining who I am and who I

want to become,” she said. The refuge she’s building is also for the people who view her art.

“I want my art to create spaces safe to do everything from talking about the hard things to just having fun,” she said. “A lot of my work right now is experimental. It’s also about enjoyment. That is often something that can easily be stripped away from art, but I think it is an essential part of

making art, so I want to make sure that they feel joy when they look at my work. I want them to not only see, but be seen as a result.”

Haley bases her work on the experiences of marginalized groups. However, being branded and celebrated as a “Black artist,” as often happens, doesn’t sit well with her.

“I’m very interested in dismantling this concept of ‘Black art’ because whenever my work has been referred to as ‘Black art,’ it has always been in a sub-categorical context. I can’t just be seen as an artist, my race has to be mentioned as well,” Haley said. “And I think that’s an unfortunate thing that happens in the art world. I want to be able to create spaces where Black artists feel like they’re just being seen for their art and not just for their blackness.”

Pofa Ink has already begun making a name for herself in the art world. But at 23, she is most proud of managing to persevere through various challenges. “A lot of people have dreams, but I also had a lot of doubts, a lot of fears, a lot of insecurities. Despite all of that, I’ve managed to not only keep going in my career,

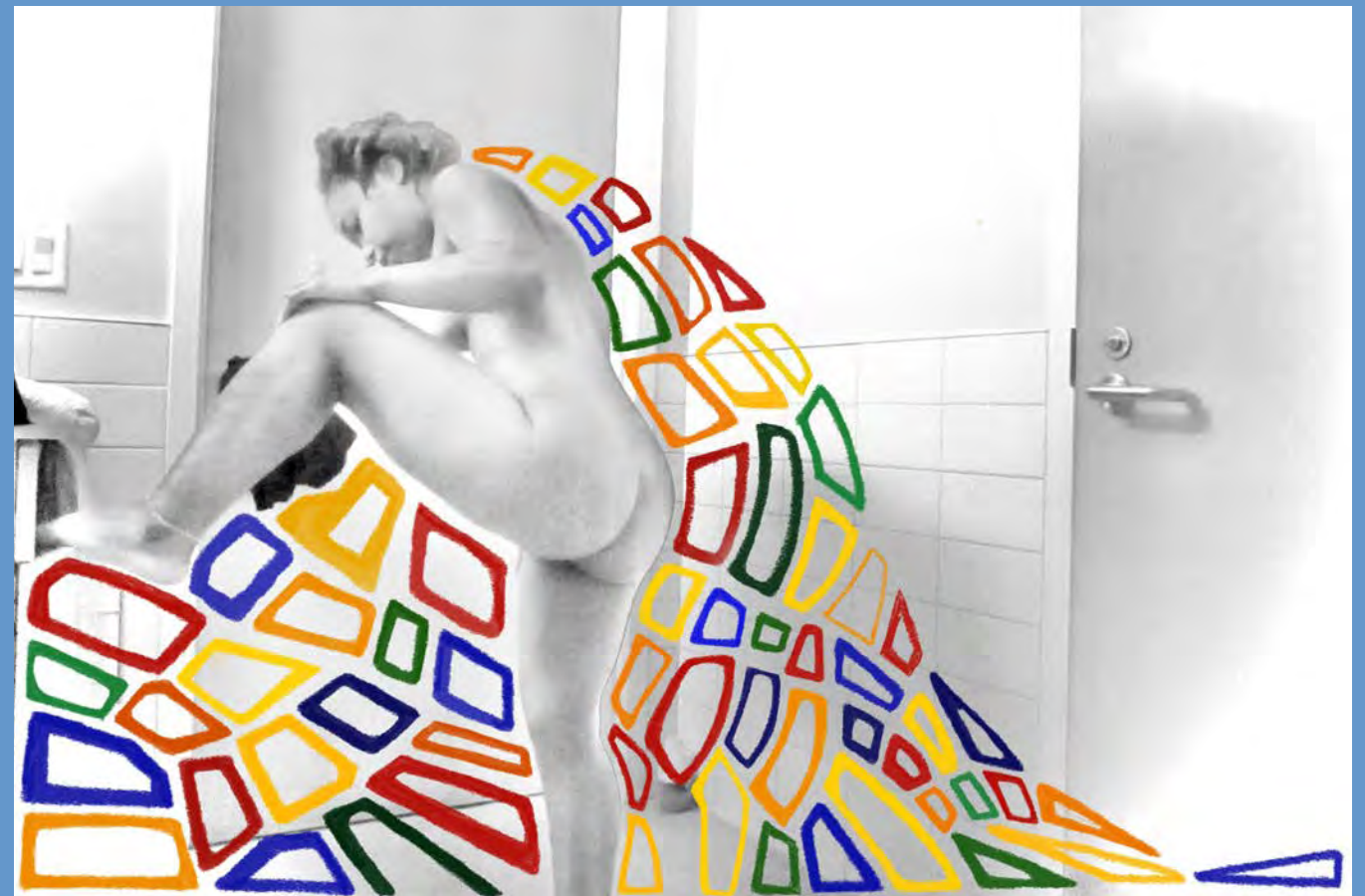
but continue pushing myself to reach new heights as well.” After graduating next May, she wants to start a mentorship network that will help make resources more accessible for creatives of color.

“Newark is filled to the brim with amazing artists and I don’t think artists of color are often given the knowledge on how to go about finding opportunities and receiving grants,” she said.

She also wants to start her own jewelry line, open a gallery space in Newark, and become director of the Newark Museum of Art. Ashanti Haley a/k/a Pofa Ink recognizes that’s a tall order but she is used to setting – and achieving – ambitious goals.

Anya Dillard is a junior majoring in Journalism and Video Production.

Ashanti Haley in Conversations with My Black Body: “In the Shapes of Me.” Piece by Ashanti Haley.

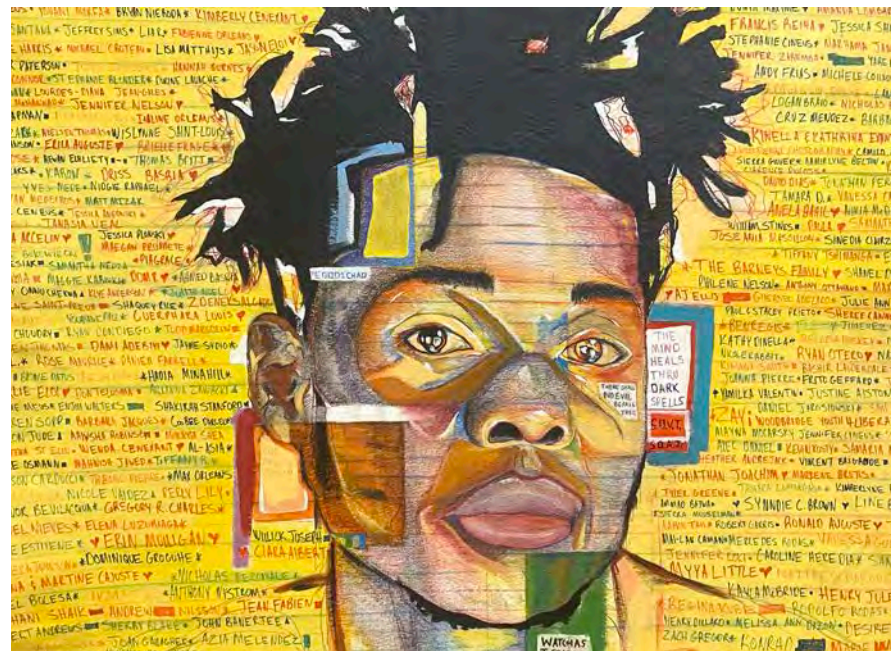


Figures Who Look Like Me

Newark artist Bleriot Thompson's 45 portraits of African-American heroic icons, including his cousin

By Abdullah Allen

This piece, Chad, is Thompson's favorite. It honors his late cousin Chadly Julian, who died in a fire at Thompson's family home in 2021. Photograph by Abdullah Allen.



Through his first solo exhibition, *Public Enemy* at Gallery Aferro, Newark artist Bleriot Thompson has sought to expose the racism and the ugliness that his subjects encountered and fought against to become household names. He has created 45 portraits of social justice activists, including African-American icons such as Rosa Parks, Jessie Owens and Amiri Baraka.

"Civilizations may crumble, but these names will not be among the ruins," Thompson said. The quote captures his desire to effectively document African-American history. Thompson said, "I think I was watching the documentary on fallen empires, and I started to think about how we look

at a civilization that is in ruins. What survives the ruins? What is lost in the ruins? And how can we better preserve and document our culture and history moving forward."

Bleriot used paint, wax, trees, mud and clay, and a plethora of colors to create visually compelling portraits of the African-American icons. The choice of unconventional materials for the portrait series came after much experimentation that resulted in "the answer, almost like an equation," said the artist. "I was approaching it mathematically" Despite his subjects' different eras, ages and genders, they share a look, not by accident. "I was trying to accurately depict figures that look

"Civilizations may crumble, but these names will not be among the ruins." - Bleriot Thompson

like me," Thompson said. "I didn't want it to be super abstract or ambiguous in a way that they were undefined. I wanted them to have all these enhancements."

Thompson was born in Newark. His mother migrated to New Jersey from Haiti while she was pregnant with him.

His calling as an artist began accidentally.

"In my sophomore year of high school, I was just looking for an elective," he said. "I was hoping to take a cooking course, to be honest. I ended up in this art class. It was the camaraderie of the students in that art class that made it enjoyable. Everybody knew what they wanted to do there, and I was just experimenting. I used that time to push myself to get as good as the people around me."

Thompson earned his BFA at William Paterson University. While a college student there, he vowed to put in the work to become a master: "If I could put 10,000 hours into something like my craft, I could be constantly doing something different."



Bleriot Thompson creating art for *Public Enemy*. Courtesy of Bleriot Thompson

A pivotal moment for Thompson occurred when, during college, he viewed Kerry James Marshall's retrospective at the Met.

"I remember never seeing African Americans represented that way [before]," he said. Marshall's large-scale paintings and approach to his work left a profound impact on Thompson, who found a direction and renewed motivation to become a social justice creator. "I felt like that stuck with me."

That inspiration is on full display at Gallery Aferro with *Public Enemy*.

The exhibition isn't directly connected to the iconic late 80's rap group "Public Enemy." Nonetheless, Thompson said: "You can't talk about radical black political ideology and say you haven't been inspired by the work of Public Enemy."

Family Tragedy Alters Creation

While the show features many familiar faces to the Black community and the population at large, Thompson reminds us that heroism isn't reserved for the figures we see on television or in history books. Thompson also included the unsung.

In fact, the artist's favorite piece is titled *Long Live Chad*, a portrait of his cousin, Chadly Julian, who lost his life in a fire at the Thompson's family home in 2021, the sole victim of the tragedy. Julian had moved in with his cousin's immediate family when he was 13 years old, and he felt more like a younger brother to Thompson.

When Thompson began conceptualizing *Public Enemy*, Julian implored his cousin to do extensive research, which took four months. He had completed two or three paintings when tragedy struck. Following the fire, Thompson knew that he needed to pay tribute to his cousin, who used to send money back to his own immediate family in Haiti, ever since he started working.

As part of his mourning, Thompson persevered. "It's more than me completing the [collection]," Thompson said. "It was proving to myself that you can bounce back from all these situations. being calm in the storm. I feel like now I can have the odds stacked against me and I'm not in distress. I'm like, I'm coasting. I'm cooling."

Thompson's goal for the show became to "both educate and cope with the loss of a loved one."

Thompson takes immense pride in the exhibition, which he always "envisioned in spaces like [Gallery Aferro]," he said. "Witnessing [visitors] interact in this environment holds special significance for me," he said. But he would also like his pieces to find a place in homes. A number

of his pieces, ranging from \$500 to \$12,000, are for sale at the gallery.

Thompson is working on a new chapter of the *Public Enemy* series that will investigate the city of Newark, its people and its history. Some of the work will be displayed at an exhibition opening this January at Rutgers-Newark's Institute for the Study of Global Racial Justice at 15 Washington Street in Newark.

It's co-sponsored by the institute and the Paul Robeson Galleries at Express Newark. Stay tuned to his website www.bmtarts.com for more details. And make sure you check out his must-see show at Gallery Aferro, which is closing on Dec. 21. For more information about visiting hours, check the gallery's website at aferro.org.

"I was trying to accurately depict figures that look like me. I didn't want it to be super abstract or ambiguous in a way that they were undefined."

Abdullah Allen is a senior majoring in Journalism and minoring in Marketing.

A Canvas for Black Joy

SASN Dean Jacqueline Mattis' paintings capture the values that guide her as a clinical psychologist and scholar

By Kenneth Weiss

Photograph by Shirley Gonzalez.



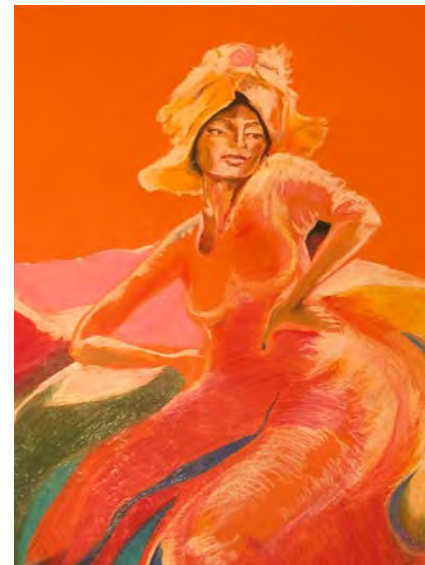
Picture a girl, drawing and coloring and carefree in the backroom of a dress shop. Now picture a different girl, swinging on a swing set to her heart's content, a big, toothy smile on her face, her hair blown by the wind. This girl, dressed in bright colors, is surrounded by rolling hills covered in vibrant green grass and bubbles, everywhere, which refract the sunlight.

The first image comes from Dean Jacqueline S. Mattis's memory, and the second, her most recent painting, from her imagination. Both images of childhood capture joy, something that she preaches about often. The dress shop, where she started drawing, was where her mother worked.

The painting, entitled *I Am All The Joys I Have Known* (above), was unveiled at an open house for the Department of Urban Education in late September and it reflects her principal belief in finding joy. Dean Mattis explains that there is a difference between happiness and joy. "Happiness is something that happens because of an external event," she says. "Joy is something that is generated from within an individual."

A clinical psychologist and psychology professor, she is the dean of Rutgers-Newark's School of Arts and Sciences. Her artwork reflects her research as a scholar on spirituality in African and Caribbean American experience. Her paintings focus on Black men, women and children and portray the magic in their lives.

I Invented My Own Rainbow. Courtesy of Jacqueline Mattis.



"I try to capture how that magic is reflected in our identity: The ways that we people hold our bodies, how we dance, how we lean when we are making music or laughing or dancing together, the audacity in the ways we move, the familiarity in the ways we pray," she says. Through her artwork, Dean Mattis aims to reflect the lives of people rarely depicted in the popular and social imagination. "We don't have many opportunities to see representations of Black and Brown people as sacred, caring for each other, touching each other in love, experiencing joy, trust, tenderness, or audaciously and unapologetically expressing themselves," she explains.

It was in her mother's dress shop in Jamaica that she started to draw and paint and began her journey of making art. The dean's late mother, Zerish Mattis Easton, took her children there because she couldn't afford childcare. She gave them the task of creating books for her while at the shop. "When she was on breaks, she would have us read the books to her and show her the illustrations," Dean Mattis remembers. "I learned because it was a task that was given to me and I enjoyed it."

Easton, a dressmaker, was an artist in her own right. Since she didn't have access to any patterns to make dresses, Easton had to find inspiration within herself for

her designs. "I grew up watching my mom draw what was in her imagination and then put it onto clothes," Dean Mattis says.

Dean Mattis finds inspiration within herself too. "There's a feeling of joy or a desire to have a particular mood reflected," she says. "I'll see someone or see an image and that sort of triggers that feeling for me."

Her paintings stir another feeling: a sense of connection. Connection between people, connection between people and objects and connection between animals. Her work highlights how humans interact with each other and how the world interacts around them.

Dean Mattis is self-taught as an artist. She finds this rewarding, because she learns new things as she paints. "So when I'm painting I'm just experimenting with how colors mix with each other," she says. "This is what light does when it hits glass, or when it hits someone's face." She lets the art change shape. "When I'm working sometimes things don't work out the way that I originally imagined," she says. "But the thing that I'm learning over time, I've got to give myself the flexibility not to be wedded to the first thing that I remembered or imagined."

Although she loves to paint, Dean Mattis's busy schedule makes it a challenge. She paints whenever she is free. She might find time on weekends. Or she might get up early or go to bed late, sometimes staying up until 3 a.m. Although these sessions are infrequent, Dean Mattis maintains that they are crucial to her well-being. "If something is important enough to your survival, you'll do it. So for me, painting is really critical to my survival," she says.

The Urban Education Department asked Dean Mattis to create the painting. The department's director, Professor Laura Porterfield, asked her to capture joy in the city of

Newark. Dean Mattis wanted to display that joy in a unique way. "I realized I didn't want to paint a city. What I wanted to capture is what it means to be a child," she says. "I have very clear memories of being a kid, swinging and having those wonderful moments where somebody comes and says, 'Can I swing with you?' (There's) the opportunity to be able to enjoy somebody else's joy."

I Am All The Joys I Have Known is her favorite painting thus far as well as the largest. "When [Professor Porterfield] told me what the theme was, she also gave me the size and my eyes bugged out," Dean Mattis recalls. "I was like, 'Okay, this is almost five feet by four feet.' I've never done anything this big."

Dean Mattis wants the painting to mean something to Urban Education students. "I want everyone who is there, all of the future teachers who are there, to remember that these are the kids that we teach," she says. "At the core of every kid, is a kid that is beautiful. You get the privilege of having 20 or 30 of them in your presence at any given moment. Don't waste that opportunity."

I Am All The Joys I Have Known is available to view on the first floor of the Warren building, in conference room 157.

"I try to capture the ways that we people hold our bodies, how we dance, how we lean when we are making music or laughing or dancing together, the audacity in the ways we move, the familiarity in the ways we pray."

Kenneth Weiss is a senior majoring in Journalism and minoring in English.

WE WANT TO SPEAK FOR OURSELVES

RAS BARAKA

SCARLET