

**FROM BLACK CODES
TO DISCOVERING
FREEDOM IN
POETRY AND VISUAL
ARTS:
AN HISTORICAL
CONTEXT AND LIVED
EXPERIENCE**



Dr. Denise Davis-Cotton



rEN Dillard



This Enlightenment Series is under the auspices of the USF Institute on Black Life, USF Black Employee Steering Committee, the USF Black Faculty & Staff Association, and the Racial Justice Initiative



**Dr. Denise Davis-Cotton, Director
USF CENTER for PAInT**

- **Founder and First Principal of Detroit School of Arts (1992-2010).**
- **Awarded two Keys to the City of Montgomery (Alabama) and inclusion in the Congressional Record by the 106th Congress, a Milken Foundation internationally-recognized educator and National Past President of the Arts Schools Network.**
- **Secured \$12.1 million in funding to support evidence-based instruction in low-income communities, engaging over 50 national superintendents and educational leaders annually, spanning pre-K to higher education, with a particular focus on addressing educating students from underserved communities.**
(\$8.5M- REACH grant; 2.6M – BOWS; 1M –Donor Legacy gift).
- **Wrote Curricula to Integrate Circus Arts in a high school and a middle school | Sarasota, FL.**
- **Engaging 50 national superintendents and educational leaders annually, spanning pre-K to higher education, to support more than 300 educators, reaching over 4,000 students.**
- **Recently featured as one of Sarasota’s Most Influential Women by Sarasota Magazine.**
- **Recent recipient of the *Living Legend, Lifetime Achievement Award* by the National Association of Black School Educators (NABSE).**





When you hear the word FREEDOM, what does it mean?



Overview

- Provide an Historical Context of the African American Experience
- Demonstrate a Model of Arts Integration through the connection between poetry, spoken word, and visual arts.

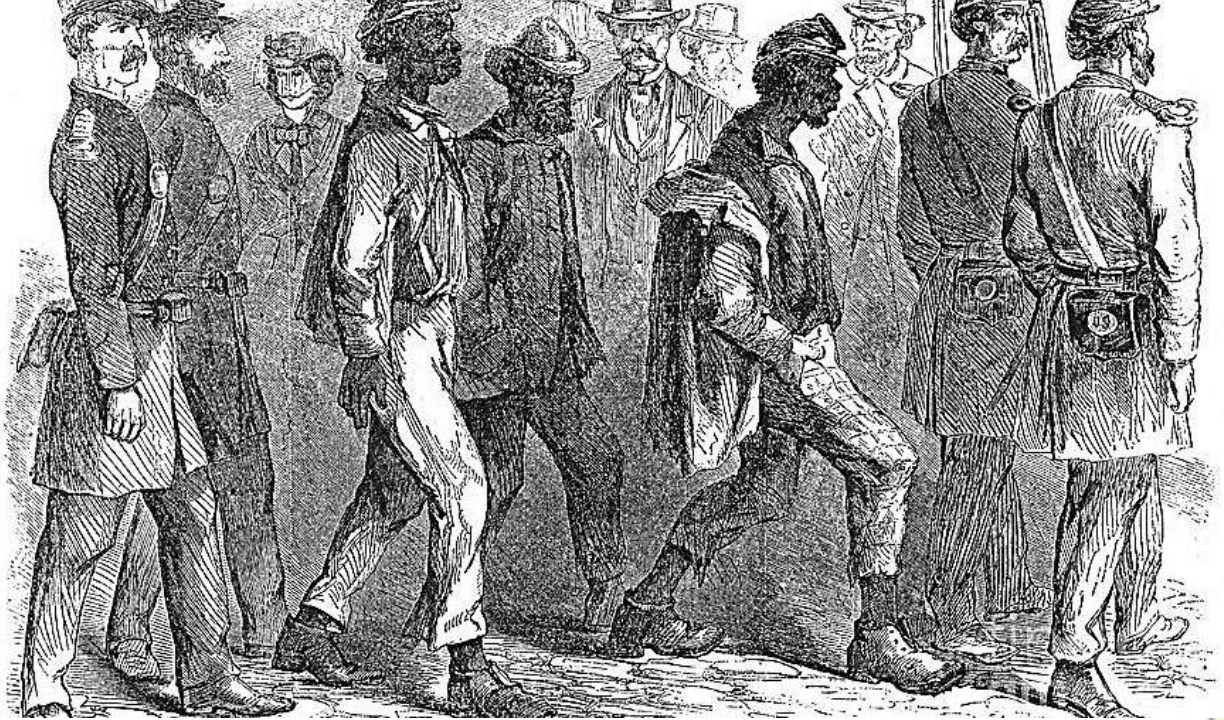


Center for PAInT's Definition of Arts Integration

“Arts integration is a diversity of knowledge, programs, experiences, and aspirations that brings meaning to ideas and content through the arts and human interactions.”

– Dr. Denise Davis-Cotton, PAInT Center Director





Overview: From Slavery to Freedom after the Civil War to Present Day

Making Freedom Meaningful in Daily Lives

- ❑ *Historical Context: Black Codes*
- ❑ *Religion and Spirituality*
- ❑ *Educational Initiatives: Freedom Schools and Historically Black Colleges*
- ❑ *Economic Cooperation: Mutual Aid Societies and Black-Owned Businesses*
- ❑ *Literary and Artistic Movements*
- ❑ *An Arts Integrated Experience in Present Day: rEN Dillard, Visual Artist*



Discussion

Overview: Birth, Bondage, and Barriers

- Black Codes were laws enacted in the aftermath of the Civil War during Reconstruction, primarily in the southern United States, to restrict the freedom and rights of newly emancipated African Americans.



- Though technically invalidated by the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and Fourteenth Amendment, the Black Codes laid the foundation for Jim Crow segregation laws that persisted into the 20th century. These laws, while varying by state, formed a comprehensive system of legal oppression that touched every aspect of African American life. [US Anti Slavery Legislation \(usantislaverylaws.org\)](http://usantislaverylaws.org)

The Reconstruction Act of 1867 weakened the effect of the Black codes by requiring all states to uphold equal protection under the 14th Amendment, particularly by enabling Black men to vote. (U.S. law prevented women of any race from voting in federal elections until 1920.)

The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, fundamentally reshaped American citizenship and civil rights through five key sections: Section 1 establishes birthright citizenship, guarantees due process, and requires equal protection under the law for all citizens.



Overview: Birth, Bondage, and Barriers

Amendments regarding African American Civil Rights after the War

- 13th - Abolished Slavery
 - 14th - Allowed Slaves to be Citizens
 - 15th - Allowed African American Males to Vote
- (Neither black or white women could vote at this time. That came with the 19th Amendment in 1920, fifty years later.)

Black Codes

- Were designed to limit the opportunities of blacks
- Passed in the South during Reconstruction.
- The Black Codes placed taxes on free blacks who tried to pursue nonagricultural professions.
- restricted the abilities of blacks to rent land or own guns, and even allowed the children of "unfit" parents to be apprenticed to the old slave masters

The Promise of Freedom and Equality to African Americans

Reconstruction: Freedman's Bureau



*Rebuilding the South after the Civil War
1865-1877*

Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands

The Freedmen's Bureau, established by the federal government, played a critical role in rebuilding the South and helping the 4 million newly freed Black individuals transition from slavery to a free-labor society: migrated to cities, purchased guns, searched for family members, started schools, conducted open meetings, and eventually voted. It was created to establish schools, help the aged and poor, and secure justice for freemen and white unionists in the south.

While the Bureau made efforts to promote land redistribution, it was largely unsuccessful. Most of the confiscated or abandoned Confederate land was eventually returned to its original owners, providing few opportunities for Black Americans to own land—a vital route to economic independence and success. It only had about 1000 agents across the south, with a small budget of \$6,000,000. (which the union army spent in less than one month.)

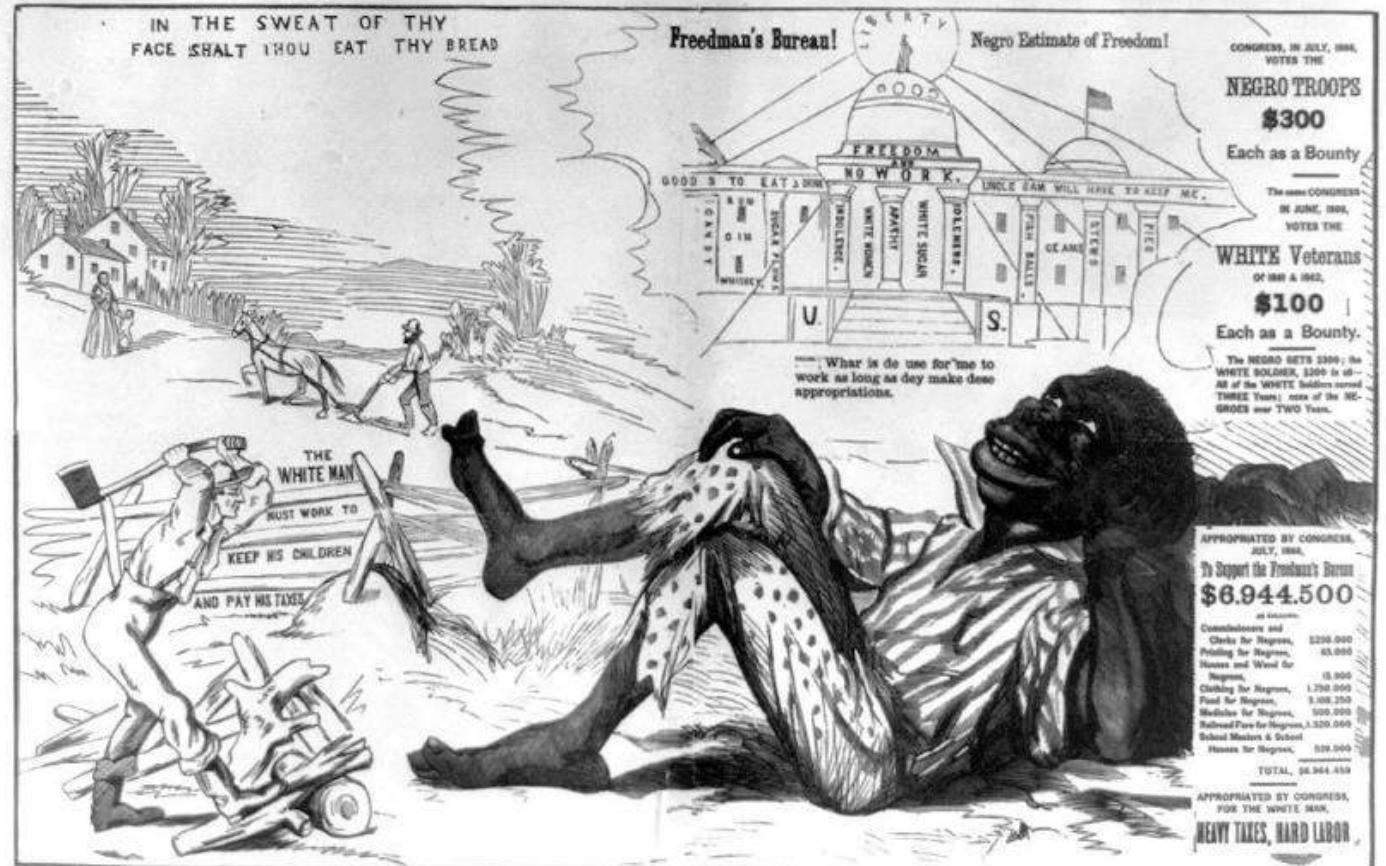
In Jan. 16, 1865, Field Order 15, was issued by Gen. Sherman set aside land for free people in GA and SC, but in 1865, former Pres. Andrew Johnson ordered the land back to its original owners. (He served as seventh Pres. from 1829-1837). In April of 1865, after Lincoln's assigination, President Andrew Johnson revoked Field Order 15.. Thus, sharecropping emerged. In the summer of 1872, under pressure from Southern legislators, Congress voted to dismantle the Freedmen's Bureau.



In the **CHAT**, write your response to the question: Describe this imagery in one word.

THE FREEDMAN'S BUREAU!

AN AGENCY TO KEEP THE **NEGRO** IN IDLENESS AT THE **EXPENSE** OF THE WHITE MAN.
TWICE VETOED BY THE **PRESIDENT**, AND MADE A LAW BY **CONGRESS**.
SUPPORT CONGRESS & YOU SUPPORT THE NEGRO. SUSTAIN THE PRESIDENT & YOU PROTECT THE WHITE MAN



Slavery to Sharecropping

- Plantation owners lost slave labor worth \$3 billion.
- In early 1865, Union General William T. Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 15, which temporarily granted 40-acre plots of abandoned coastal land to formerly enslaved people. However, President Andrew Johnson later overturned this order, dashing the hopes of many freed people who had anticipated receiving land of their own.
- After the Civil War, sharecropping arose as an agricultural system that kept formerly enslaved people in economic servitude. While landowners provided the property, shelter, equipment, and materials, sharecroppers could only offer their labor and had no authority over what crops to plant or how to sell them.
- While tenant farmers who paid rent maintained some independence in managing their crops, sharecroppers found themselves caught in an endless cycle of debt. Landowners' deceptive bookkeeping and merchants' excessive interest rates meant sharecroppers' debts for tools, supplies, and basic necessities consistently exceeded their earnings from the harvest.
- This system effectively created a new form of economic slavery, keeping African Americans tied to the land and dependent on white landowners.



Share Cropping System

Sharecropping

- The problem: whites could not farm the huge plantations of the south.
- Blacks could not afford to move from their slave homes, on the plantation.
- The Solution: Whites would allow blacks to farm on their land, in return for labor in his cotton fields. Then he would deduct, food clothing and housing from the black families.

Tenancy & the Crop Lien System

Furnishing Merchant	Tenant Farmer	Landowner
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Loan tools and seed up to 60% interest to tenant farmer to plant spring crop.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Plants crop, harvests in autumn.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Rents land to tenant in exchange for $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ of tenant farmer's future crop.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Farmer also secures food, clothing, and other necessities on credit from merchant until the harvest.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Turns over up to $\frac{1}{2}$ of crop to land owner as payment of rent.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Merchant holds "lien" (mortgage) on part of tenant's future crops as repayment of debt.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Tenant gives remainder of crop to merchant in payment of debt.	

Long-Lasting Social and Economic Disparities

In 1870, Hiram Revels made history as the first African American U.S. Senator, taking Mississippi's seat that had been previously held by Confederate President Jefferson Davis.



Mississippi's second African American Senator, Blanche K. Bruce, rose from enslavement to win election in 1875, having managed to obtain an education despite his earlier bondage.

Despite gaining citizenship after the Civil War, African Americans faced violent opposition and discriminatory legal systems that severely restricted their constitutional rights.

Role of Churches in Early Black Communities

Spiritual Guidance

Churches served as vital institutions for spiritual guidance, offering hope and faith to early Black communities.

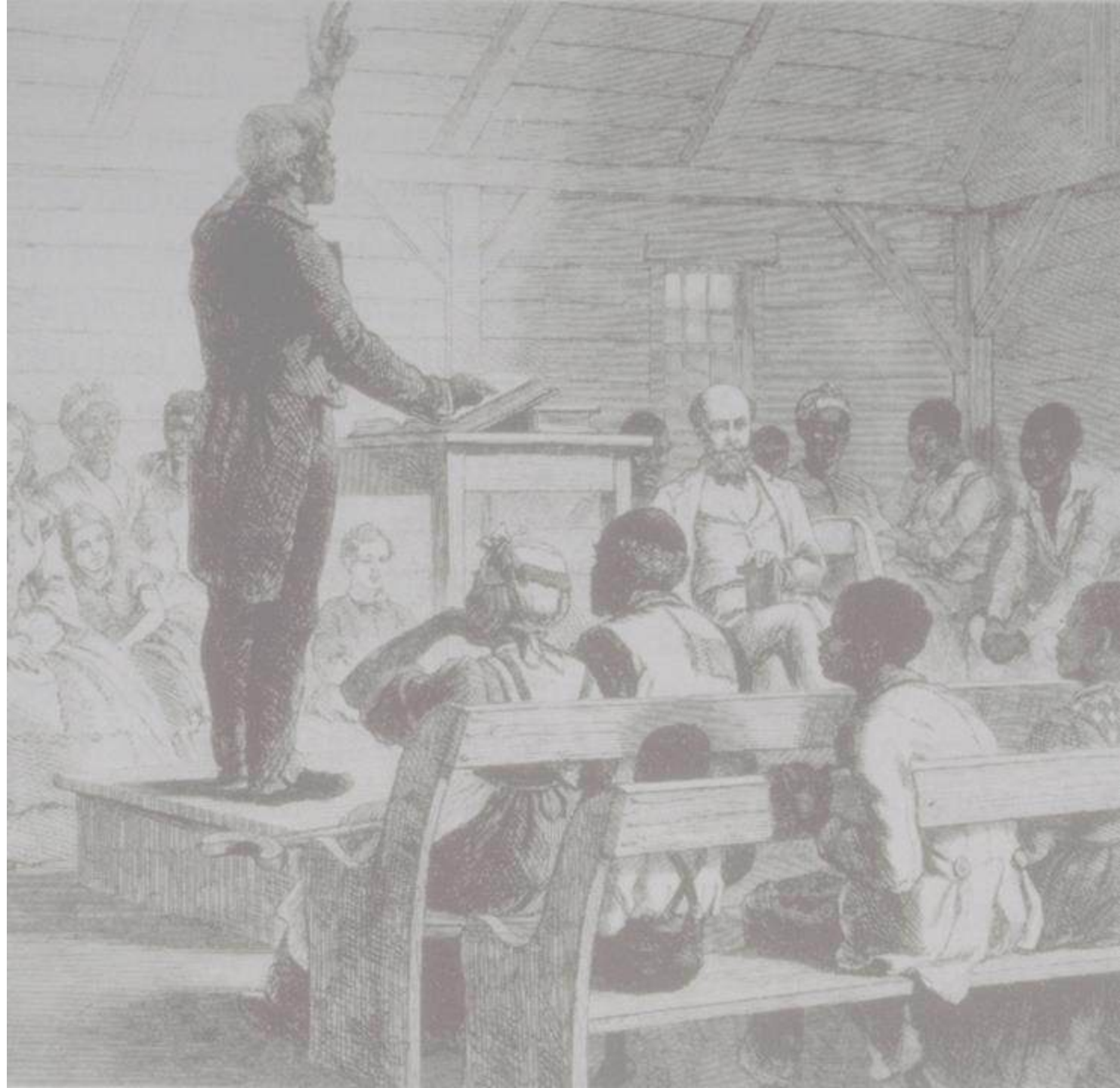
Social Support Networks

Churches provided social support systems, fostering connections among individuals in the community and encouraging mutual aid.

Mobilization for Justice

Many churches were the first places where social justice efforts emerged, mobilizing the community for collective action against injustices.

Image: <http://www.slaveryimages.com>



Formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church

Response to Racial Discrimination

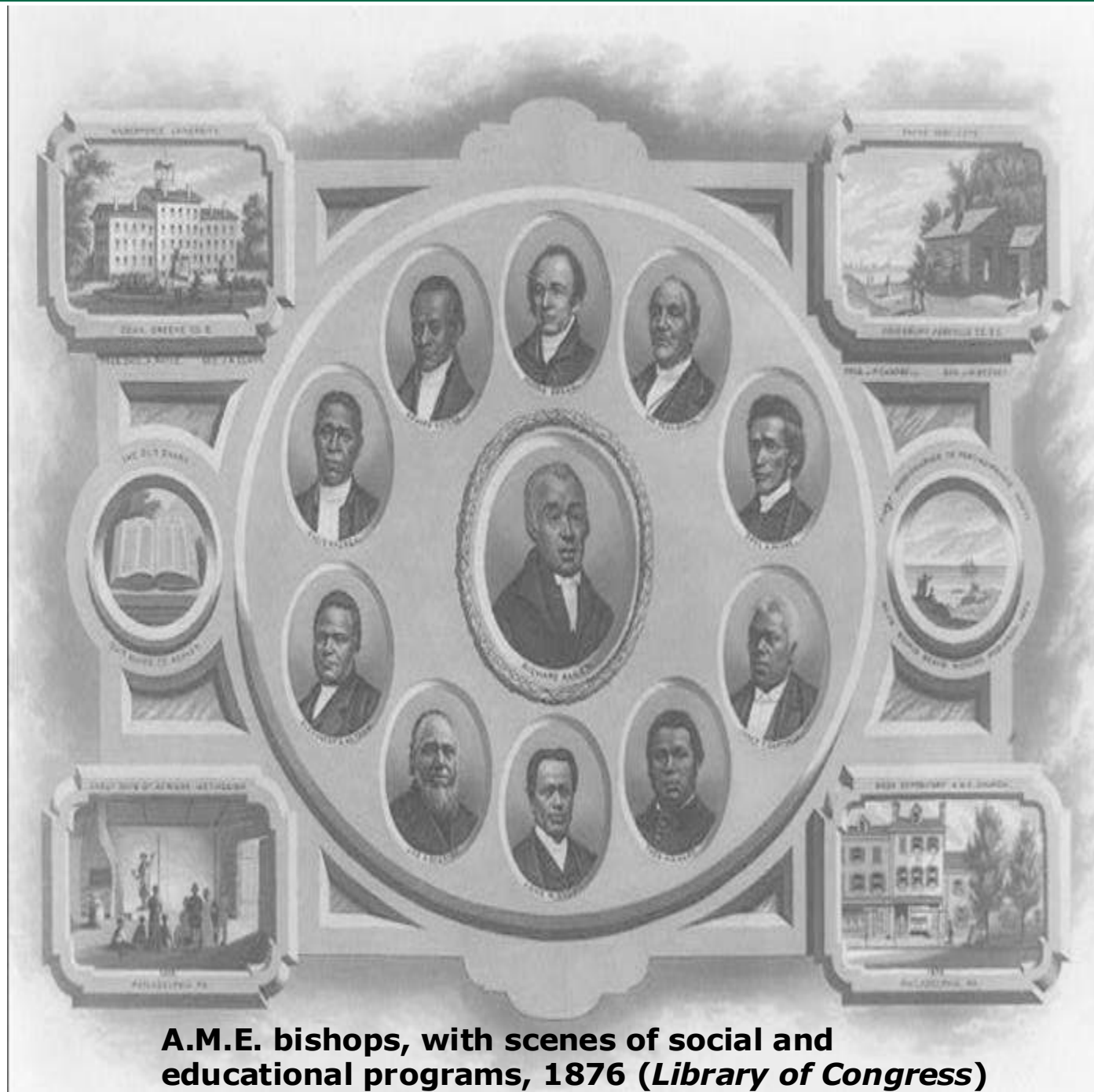
The African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded due to the racial discrimination faced by Black congregants in existing churches.

Religious Empowerment

The church became a significant religious institution, empowering Black congregants through faith and community support.

Political Institution

The African Methodist Episcopal Church played a crucial role in political activism, advocating for the rights of Black individuals.



A.M.E. bishops, with scenes of social and educational programs, 1876 (Library of Congress)

Churches as Sanctuaries and Hubs for Civil Rights Activism

Safe Havens for Activists

Churches provided a sanctuary for activists during the Civil Rights Movement, ensuring their safety and well-being.

Community Mobilization

Churches played a pivotal role in mobilizing local communities, serving as a hub for organizing events and discussions.

Resource Centers

Many churches became resource centers, providing essential supplies and support to those fighting for civil rights.



Musical Traditions: Spirituals and Blues

A white, torn-paper-like border runs along the bottom edge of the page, starting from the left and curving upwards towards the right. The rest of the page is solid black.

Origins and Significance of Spirituals



Expression of Faith

Spirituals served as a powerful form of expressing faith among African Americans during the hardships of slavery.



Cultural Resilience

These songs encapsulated the resilience and strength of a community striving for freedom and dignity.



Historical Significance

Spirituals are significant as they reflect the historical struggles and hopes of African Americans during slavery.

Blues as a Form of Expression and Resilience

Origins of Blues Music

Blues music originated from the experiences of African Americans, capturing their pain and struggles through powerful lyrics and melodies.

Emotional Expression

Blues serves as a means of emotional release for both musicians and listeners, providing a way to connect with deep feelings of sorrow and resilience.

Resilience Through Music

The blues reflect the resilience of African Americans, showcasing their ability to overcome adversity through artistic expression.



Music as a Tool for Communication and Survival

Music and Communication

Music serves as a powerful medium for communication, expressing emotions and ideas that transcend words.

Messages of Resistance

Through songs, African Americans have conveyed messages of resistance, advocating for rights and social justice.

Community Cohesion

Music fosters a sense of community, bringing people together and strengthening bonds during challenging times.



Educational Initiatives: Freedom Schools and Historically Black Colleges



Establishment and Impact of Freedom Schools

Origins of Freedom Schools

Freedom Schools emerged during the Civil Rights Movement to empower Black students through education and critical thinking.

Alternative Education Model

These schools provided an alternative to segregated education, emphasizing inclusion and diverse perspectives.

Civic Engagement Focus

Freedom Schools emphasized civic engagement and critical thinking, preparing students to be active participants in their communities.



The Founding of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Purpose of HBCUs

HBCUs were founded to create accessible higher education opportunities specifically for Black students, addressing educational inequalities.

Role in Academic Excellence

HBCUs have been pivotal in promoting academic excellence, producing notable scholars and leaders within the African American community.

Cultural Significance

HBCUs have a rich cultural heritage that celebrates African American history, traditions, and contributions to society.

Educational Empowerment and Social Mobility

Breaking Poverty Cycles

Education plays a vital role in breaking the cycles of poverty, enabling individuals to achieve better economic outcomes.

Empowerment through Knowledge

By gaining knowledge and skills, individuals are empowered to advocate for themselves and their communities.

Social Mobility

Education encourages social mobility, allowing individuals to move up the socioeconomic ladder and improve quality of life.



Economic Cooperation: Mutual Aid Societies and Black-Owned Businesses



Development of Community Services

Financial Assistance

Black Banks and Credit Unions provided crucial financial support to members during times of economic hardship, ensuring community stability.

Healthcare Services

These societies offered healthcare services and resources, helping members access necessary medical care and support.

Community Support

Mutual aid societies fostered a sense of community and solidarity, bringing people together to support one another in difficult times.



Growth and Significance of Black-Owned Businesses

Economic Independence

Black-owned businesses play a vital role in achieving economic independence within communities, empowering individuals and families.

Job Creation

These businesses contribute significantly to job creation, helping to reduce unemployment rates and provide opportunities.

Community Development

The success of Black-owned businesses fosters community development by enhancing local economies and infrastructure.

Fostering Community Pride

The growth of these businesses instills pride in communities, promoting a sense of identity and belonging.



Economic Self-Sufficiency and Community Support

Stronger Support Networks

Economic self-sufficiency among Black communities creates stronger support networks that contribute to overall community health and well-being.

Investing in Local Businesses

Investing in local businesses not only fosters economic growth but also cultivates a sense of belonging and shared purpose within the community.

Resilience Against Inequalities

Economic self-sufficiency enhances resilience against systemic inequalities, empowering communities to thrive despite external challenges.



Literary and Artistic Movements

A decorative white torn paper effect runs horizontally across the bottom of the slide, with irregular, jagged edges that create a layered, textured appearance against the black background.

Preservation of African American Experiences Through Literature

Cultural Preservation

Literature serves as a vital means of preserving African American cultural heritage through storytelling and historical narratives.

Conveying Struggles

Writers use literature to articulate the struggles and challenges faced by African Americans, providing a voice to their experiences.

Promoting Awareness

African American literature not only preserves experiences but also raises awareness about social issues and injustices.



Harlem Renaissance and Its Impact

Cultural Movement

The Harlem Renaissance was a significant cultural movement in the 1920s that celebrated and expressed Black culture.

Influence on Art and Literature

This movement produced a wealth of artistic and literary works that highlighted African American experiences, fostering greater recognition and appreciation.

Social Impact

The Harlem Renaissance transformed societal perceptions of African Americans, promoting pride and encouraging future generations to embrace their heritage.



Romare Bearden

Contemporary Artistic Expressions and Cultural Preservation

Preserving African American Culture

Contemporary artists use their work to preserve and promote African American culture, ensuring its legacy continues.

Highlighting Ongoing Struggles

Art serves as a platform to address and highlight ongoing social struggles faced by African American communities.

Inspiring Future Generations

Through artistic expression, contemporary artists inspire younger generations to engage with their cultural heritage and advocate for change.



REN Dillard

REACH Grant Multidisciplinary Teaching Artist

- rEN Dillard is a multidisciplinary creative who uses oil paint, precious metal, spoken word, curation, and collage to convey often complex philosophical ideas through his work.
- An affirmed contemporary black artisan, Dillard critically examines the western canon, the works of old masters, the traditional notions of authorship and mastery. He was an Instructor for Fulton County Arts and Culture's "Youth Arts Adventures" program with artists Willie Parker at South Fulton Arts Center, and developed "Art Fusion" curriculum where students explore the subtle relationship between spoken word, poetry and visual arts.
- He was also the lead Instructor for Fulton County Arts and Culture's "Living Out Loud" Arts and Cultural Classes for Fulton County seniors 55+.
- rEN is also a founding member of the Legacy Youth Arts Mentorship Program working with at risk youth in Atlanta's West End in association with Gallery 992 and A.W.O.L. [All Walks of Life] organization in Savannah Georgia. AWOL is a registered 501(c)3 that provides arts and technology education for at-risk youth and lastly founded The Spitfire Poetry Group in Savannah Georgia.
- The group is currently Savannah Georgia's leading spoken word presence and one of the most creative incubators for spoken word artists in the southeast. Spitfire Poetry artists work in local schools teaching the next generation, emboldening young minds with skills necessary for thoughtful, powerful self-expression.
- The group exposed some of Savannah's brightest young people to competitive performance poetry. Spitfire focused on teaching youth alternative ways to express themselves through spoken word instead of resorting to aggression and violence.
- Dillard is currently Chief Visionary and lead instructor of the "New Narrative" Introduction to Collage program at Studio Swan Center in Chattahoochee Hills, GA.





When you hear the term DEPICTING FREEDOM, what comes to mind?



Don't Worry

reN Dillard

Discovering Freedom in Poetry and Visual Arts

USF Center for PAInT | REACH Teaching Artist reN Dillard



Dr. Welsing's Fever Dream

ReN Dillard

Visual Arts: Depicting Freedom

Role of Visual Arts: Visual representation of freedom through paintings, photographs, and digital art.

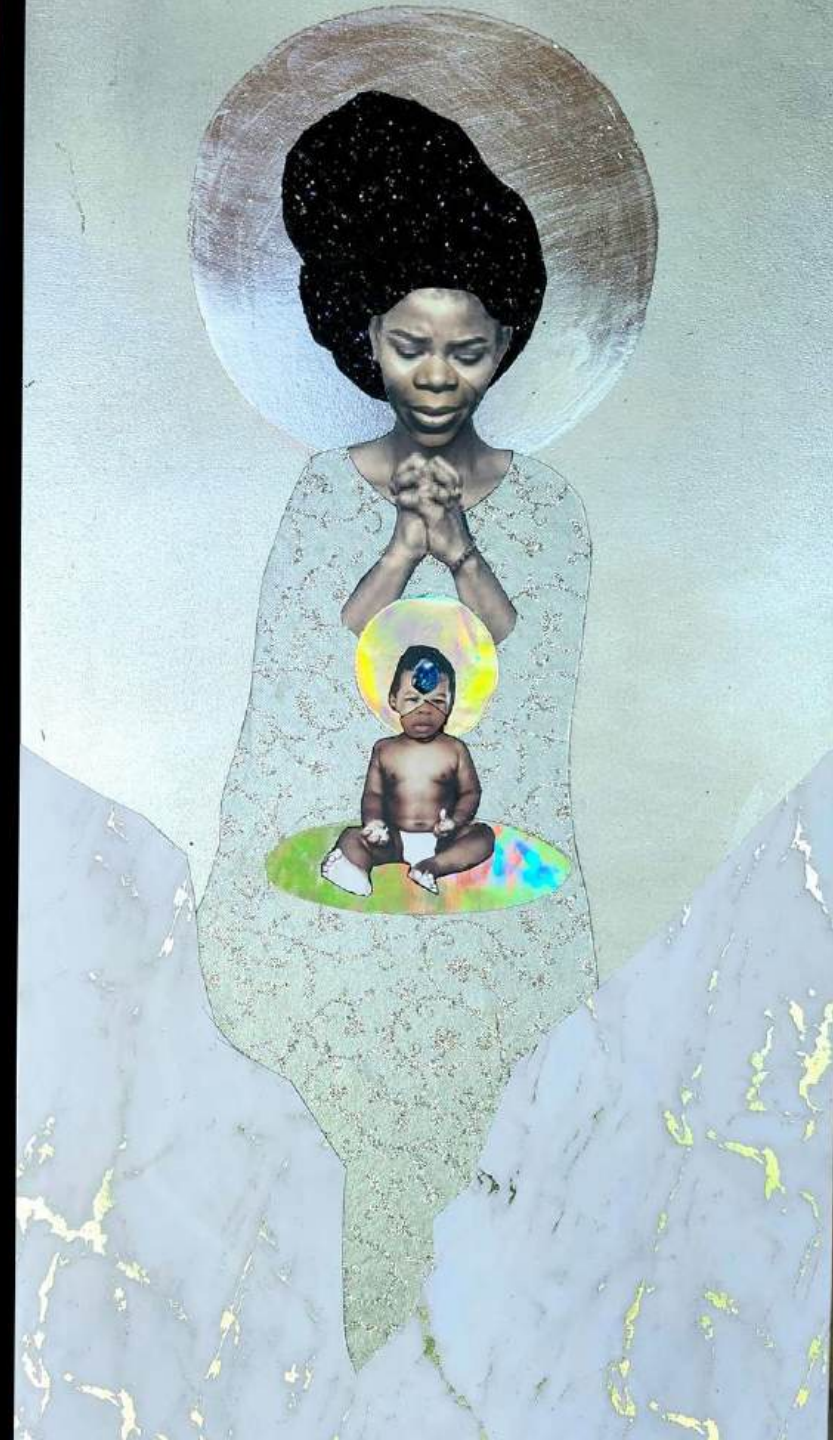
Analysis: How artists convey the concept of freedom visually.

Visual Artists who dealt with FREEDOM in their work

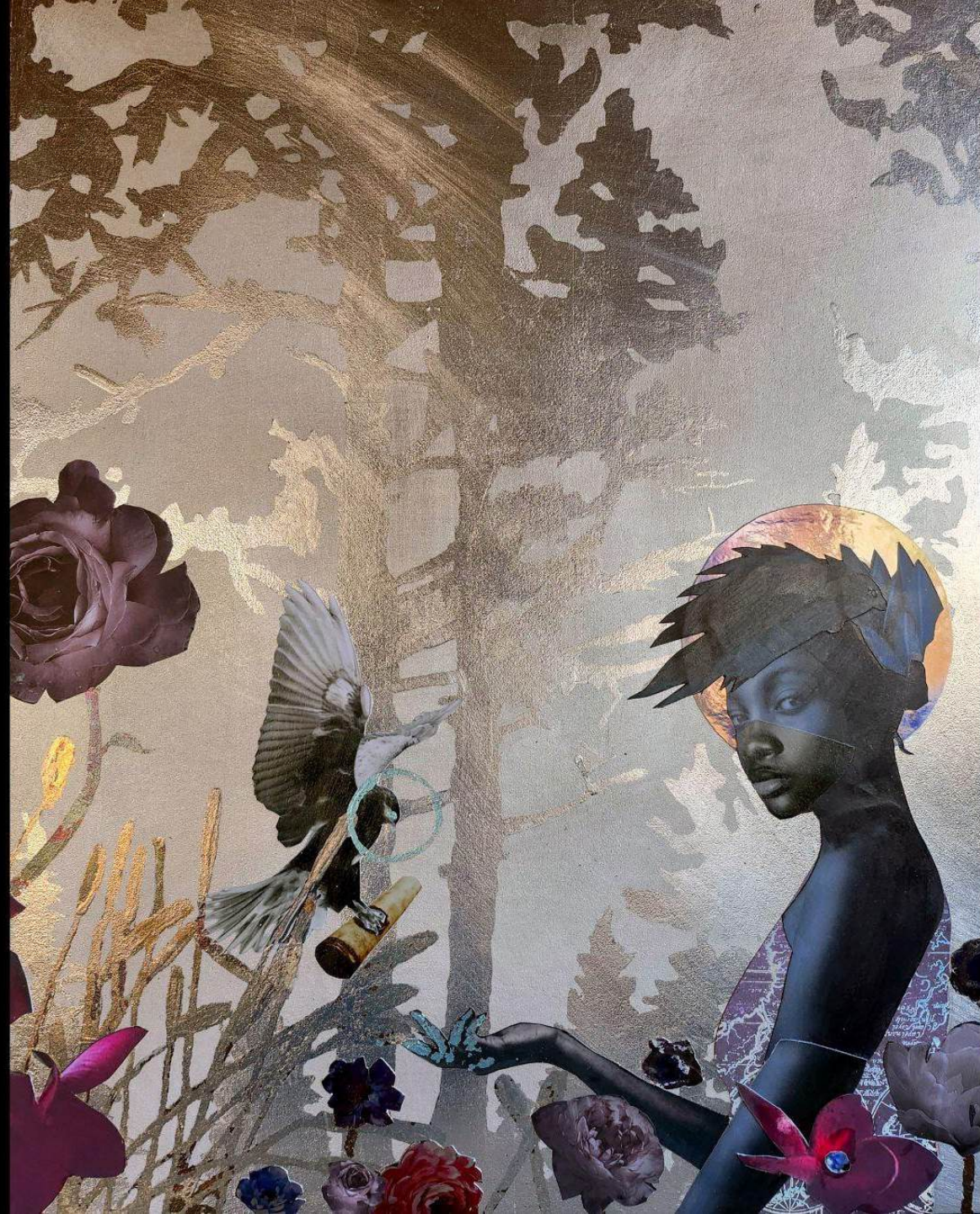
- **Aaron Douglas** - Known for his work during the Harlem Renaissance, Douglas's painting "Let My People Go" symbolizes the broader struggle for freedom and civil rights.
- **Faith Ringgold** - Celebrated for her narrative quilts, Ringgold's works often explore themes of race, gender, and identity, documenting the struggles and achievements of black lives.
 - **Jean-Michel Basquiat** - His raw, emotional art often commented on race and social issues, reflecting the struggles and triumphs of African Americans.
- **Alma Thomas** - A leading figure in modern art, Thomas's abstract paintings reflect joy, energy, and a love for life, often using intense hues and geometric shapes.
- **Jacob Lawrence** - Known for his "Migration Series," Lawrence's work depicts the mass movement of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North, highlighting their search for freedom and better opportunities.



Wings as a symbol of FREEDOM









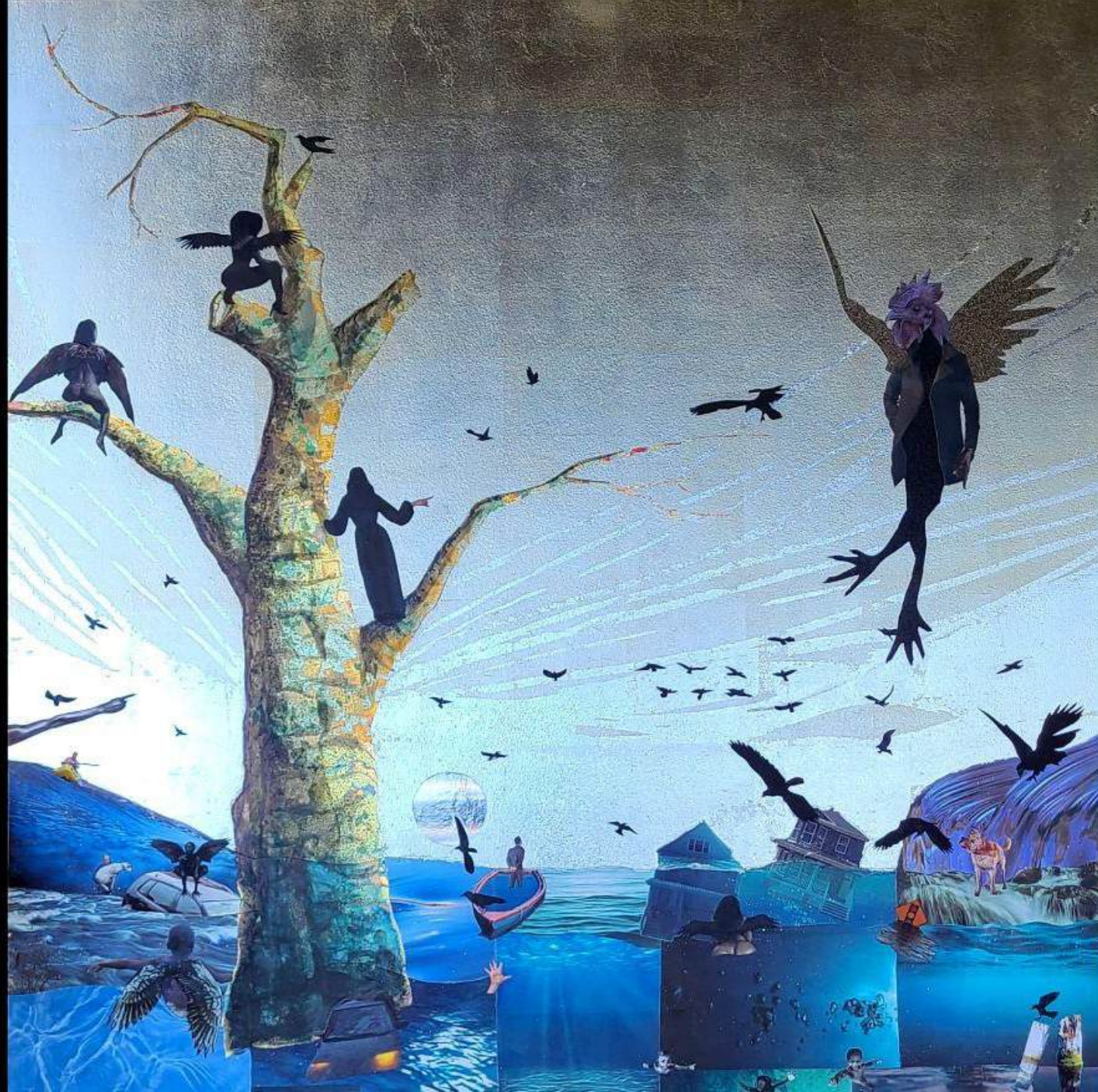
Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. ~ Martin Luther King Jr.





What role can creativity play in enhancing freedom-themed visual arts projects, such as through digital art, virtual galleries, or multimedia storytelling?





An impressionist painting with a vibrant, textured background of various colors including blues, greens, yellows, and purples, with visible brushstrokes. The text "Artistic Freedom" is centered in the middle of the image.

Artistic Freedom

In 'Hold the Line' at ArtsXchange, Black men speak on their own terms

CHARLES STEPHENS × OCTOBER 4,
2024

The curators of *Hold the Line* at ArtsXchange in East Point gave 35 Black male artists the chance to do something unusual — be anything they want.

::



Hold the Line at ArtsXchange. (Image courtesy of rEN Dillard)



Arts & Culture

Events in Atlanta

Georgia Entertainment



Credit: Photo by Tafawa Arthur H

"Hold the Line" artists.





Artistic Integration Tips

Enhance your spoken word performances with powerful visual elements for greater impact.

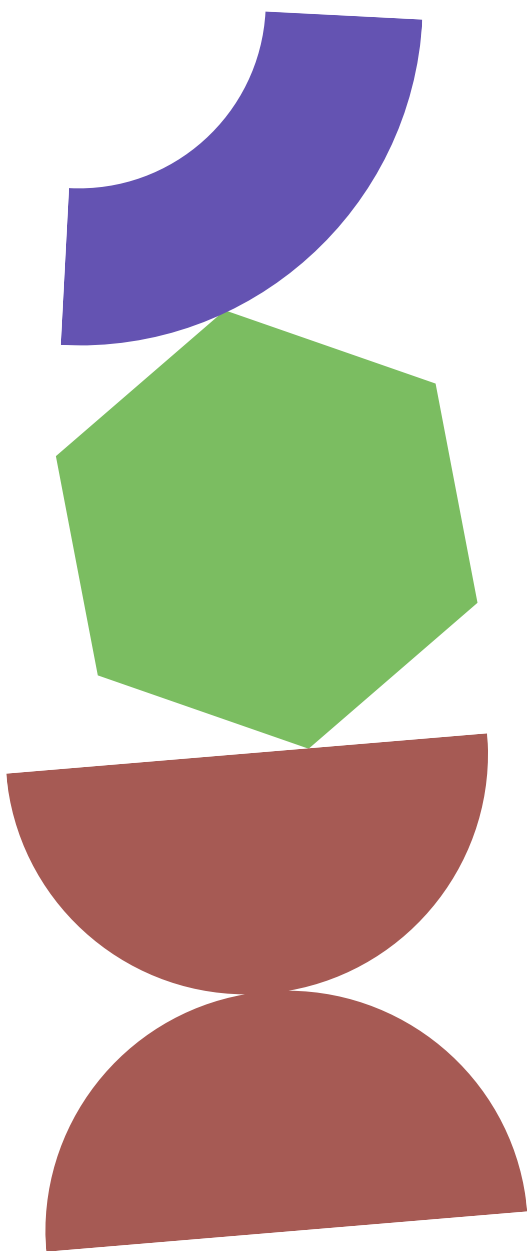
Combine **visuals** with poetry to create a **vibrant storytelling experience** that engages your audience.







The Juneteenth Celebration at the Jepson Center also included a performance by Atlanta visual and spoken word artist Ren Dillard who co-founded Savannah's

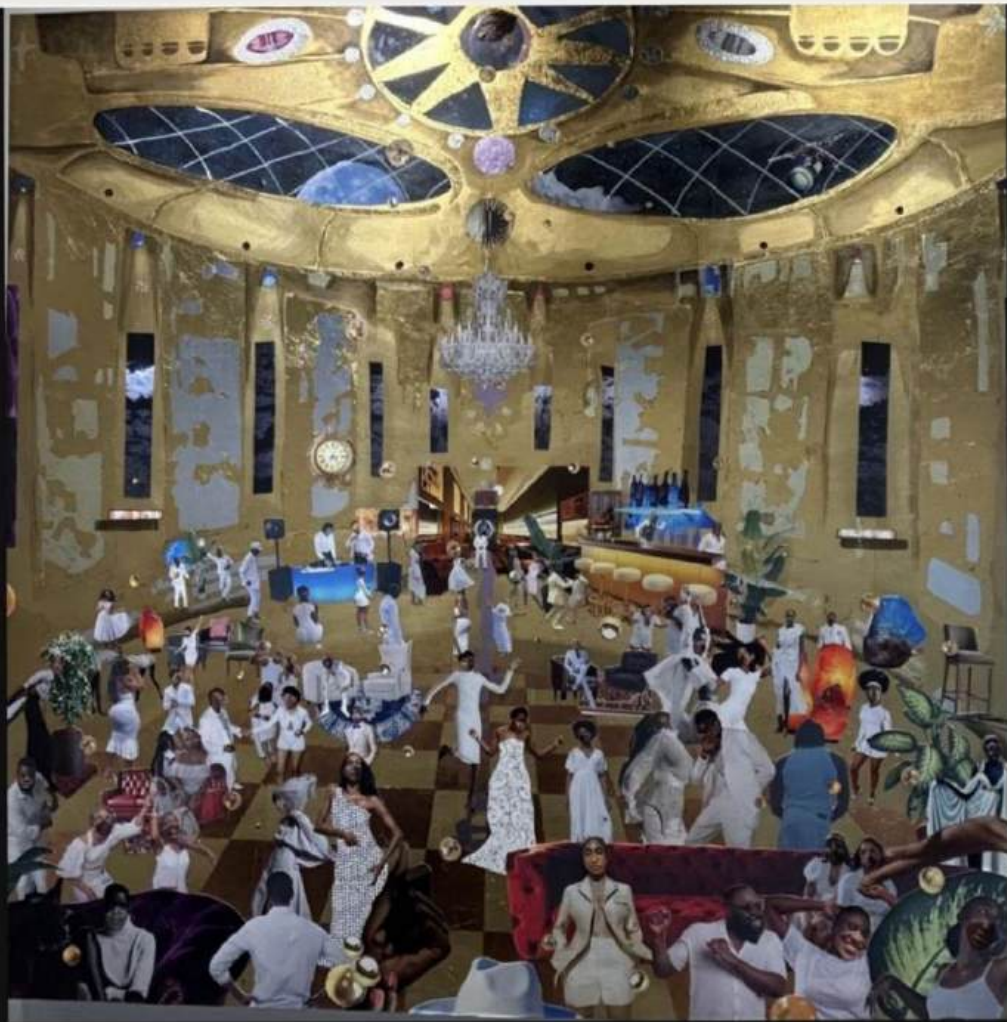


Voice and Identity in Art

Expressing **individuality** fosters a sense of empowerment.

FREEDOM: The Audacity to be Authentic

Strength Through
Vulnerability



rEN Dillard's solo exhibition, "Letters to Deja" is currently on display at the Mason Fine Art Gallery, Photo by Noah Washington/The Atlanta Voice

Arts

ONLINE

The Power of Typography: Activism Meets Design at MODA

rEN Dillard's "Letters to Deja"



rEN Dillard's solo exhibition, "Letters to Deja" is currently on display at the Mason Fine Art Gallery. Photo by Noah Washington/The Atlanta Voice

BY NOAH WASHINGTON

rEN Dillard does not see himself as an artist but as an alchemist, turning nothing into something. "All of this work started out as blank panels or blank canvases, and I had to work it all the way up to the point that you see it now," Dillard stated.

In his solo exhibition, "Letters to Deja" at the Mason Fine Art Gallery, Dillard transforms materials into visual narratives that bridge familial separation, racial consciousness, and esoteric philosophy. The exhibition, which opened November 15th and runs through January 16th, 2025, is a visual correspondence to his estranged daughter, Deja, now in her 20s.

Originally from Savannah, Georgia, Dillard's artistic journey took flight in Philadelphia around 2005 when he was 28. Initially

drawn to the city of brotherly love, inspired by Philadelphia's known mural scene, "I bought cheap acrylic paints and created my first painting. A friend saw it and was amazed, asking where I bought it. That moment was a catalyst; I realized art was at its core." His first breakthrough came through curator Lilliana Dovic, who gave him six months to prepare for his first solo exhibition at Smile Gallery in Philadelphia. Dillard subsequently moved to Atlanta in 2012 to find a market that could support his ambitious artistic vision.

As stated, Dillard describes himself as an alchemist, transforming blank canvases into valuable artworks through "transmutation." His use of materials like gold and silver leaf symbolizes this alchemical journey from base materials to precious art. Beyond mere visual

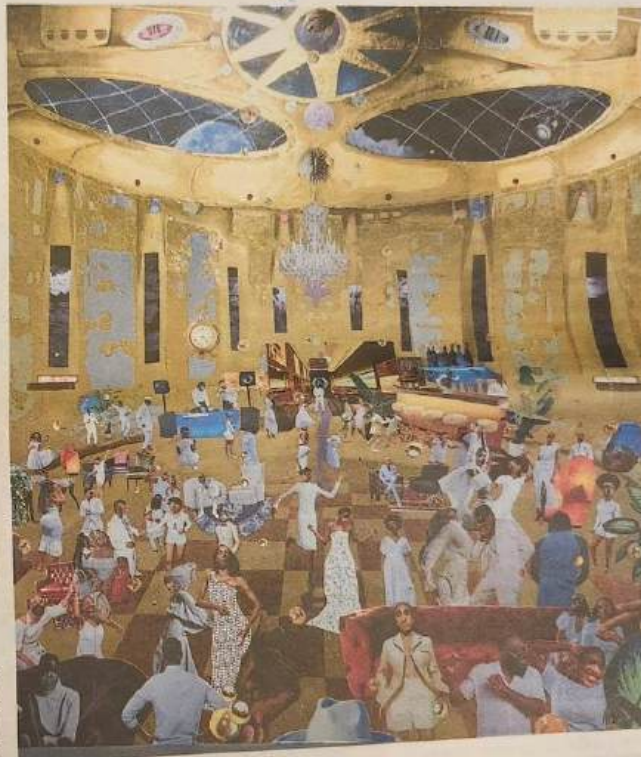


Photo by Noah Washington/The Atlanta Voice

appeal, each piece carries deeper philosophical meanings, often drawing from hermetic principles and ancient wisdom.

Another notable work, *Before I Let Go*, evokes a grand, Gatsby-esque celebration. Set aboard an imagined mother-ship, it portrays Black joy as a revolutionary act. Dillard describes, layering gold leaf and collage elements to create a vibrant, immersive scene. "Black joy is radical in today's society," he said. Similarly, another piece, *The First Seven*, draws on Hermetic philosophy, exploring the seven principles of existence

through layered copper, silver, and oil paint textures.

A deeply personal piece in the collection is a portrait of Dillard's daughter, created from an image on her Instagram page. All I Ask Of You, encases her likeness in a visual representation of gold and silver. "It's like a five arts vision board. I hope one day she'll have this piece," Dillard shared. The exhibit *Letters to Deja* is an ode to Dillard's daughter, who he has not seen in over five years. The exhibition's works reflect themes of Black womanhood, embodying the guidance and conversations he wishes to share with her.

The artist will discuss his work in depth during an artist's talk on January 11th, 2025, at noon EST, moderated by artist Dr. Arru Lindsay. The talk promises to delve into the multiple layers of meaning within Dillard's work from personal history to philosophical undertones.

Dillard aims for the viewer of his art to walk away from the exhibit and question more than what is seen on the surface. He wants people to just do that general, in life. Not take the low-hanging fruit, really listen actively listen to people and to understand their stories."



Ren Dillard's "Letters to Deja" at Mason Fine Art. Collage work from one of the curators of the popular "Hold the Line" exhibition at ArtsXchange.

reN Dillard



Enlightenment Survey Link 2 11 2025

https://usf.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_55yhUGJj5LdJpnU

