

**42<sup>nd</sup> Annual Marion Thompson Wright Lecture  
Play and Performance  
February 19, 2022**

**Remarks by Nancy Cantor, Chancellor, Rutgers University – Newark**

Thank you, dear colleagues and friends, who have organized this wonderful gathering. I want in that spirit to take a moment to pay tribute to James Leo Price, Jr., our dear Clem's brother, whom we lost this past January, but whose decades of dedicated work as a nationally distinguished school principal and educator, reminds of us of the work ahead for all of us to use education as a time and place to come together and share our minds toward a better world.

Indeed, we are living in a very *serious* moment when *historical revelation* – the very task at the heart of 42 years of the MTW lecture series that propels the commitments today to revelatory truth of the scholars and artists and citizens who come together in the Clement Price Institute, Express Newark, and the Newark Museum of Art and that animates the heartbeat of our city of Newark, over all these many decades – no centuries – is under attack. Yes, we are living in a serious moment when historical revelation is feared more than celebrated. Yet we my friends are here today to celebrate it, no matter what.

We are living in a time when the power of historical revelation, whether from journalists in the *1619 project* or legendary novelists from Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eyes* to Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* to graphic novelist Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, brings forth a movement all too familiar from past centuries of repression to ban-the-books and any teaching related to race and gender and sexuality. In fact, there is so much pent-up racist energy, according to Dana Milbank in the *Washington Post*, that "PEN America reports that in the first three weeks of January 2022, 71 "gag-order" bills banning the teaching of certain concepts were introduced or pre-filed in state legislatures across the country."<sup>1</sup>

Yes, all of a sudden, protecting children – well, white children – from the discomfort of historical revelation, narrated through the power of a novelist's words, an artist's pictures, and a serious teacher's voice, is more urgent than ensuring that all the children in the classroom will grow in a world where they can speak their own voices. And speaking of voices, we live in a progressive state that can't quite bring itself to "say the word" – reparations – to quote our dear partner Ryan Haygood from NJISJ,<sup>2</sup> or to own up to the responsibility of school desegregation, as our colleague Elise Boddie and the *NJ Coalition for Diverse and Inclusive Schools*<sup>3</sup> continues to fight for, in order that the voices of all our children are heard by all our children in the same classroom, not miles apart in the red-lined geographies defined by the very history that so many now want to whitewash.

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Milbank, "Current Weather: A Blizzard of Snowflakes in the Red States," *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Ryan Haygood, "Say 'the Word' this Juneteenth," *NJ.com*, June 13, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gnjumc.org/racial-justice/segregation-in-new-jersey-schools/nj-coalition-for-diverse-and-inclusive-schools-njedis/>.

What then do we do when historical revelation confronts the silencing of whitewashing? Certainly, we fight back in the courts (and cheer the brilliance of the lone Black woman who must be heard, even as the progress of affirmative action is dismantled by those that fear those very voices being educated). Certainly, we jump past the obstacles relentlessly erected to get to the voting booth and send voices of reason and moral responsibility to govern us all. Certainly, we unite to contribute to affordable housing, to capitalize local businesses, and to cultivate all the nascent talent in our midst at our schools and universities. Yes, we do that and more, knowing that we know the history that others so want to whitewash.

At the same time, in our hearts and in our heads, we know that the only way to really undo the force of whitewashing is to paint with a different color, speak loudly with a different voice, play a different tune, portray a different history, a different childhood, a different set of dreams, play a different part than they relegate you to over and over again through history – turn the narrative, to your narrative, not theirs for you. And that, of course, is where and when and why the artist enters the room, in ways that simply can't be ignored, no matter how many gag-bills pass. The murals on the street still speak out, the photographs entice us all into a different utopia, the quilts wrap us in the warmth of shining family practice, the violin weaves through so many genres owned by the very voices history tried to stifle, and the playwright performs through the very words that real people speak, even when they are told to whisper rather than risk making others uncomfortable.

But whisper is not what we are about today. We are about play and performance that looks straight at history, straight at each other as the remarkable Bisa Butler, whom we will hear from today, wrote in describing the genesis of her quilted narratives – “I feel driven to tell my side of the story. we are all in this together and until we know both sides of the story, our history will be incomplete... All my pieces are done in life scale to invite the viewer to engage in dialogue – the figures all look the viewers directly in their eyes.”<sup>4</sup> That directness is so to be treasured as we live in a world of indirection and avoidance of real stories, real people, real history, real struggles, as another of our trenchant artists in today's program, Dominique Morisseau revolts against with her lyrical dialogues that don't ever shy away from the very economic and social changes that real people speak out for in urban America then, and now.

And lest we think that play and performance isn't serious – isn't up to confronting the serious moment we are in with an alternative vision of what is real and who is strong and joyful and beautiful – take a long look, as Deborah Willis writes in the *The New Yorker* at Tyler Mitchell's *Redefining Portraits* to see “how deeply committed he was to changing existing visual narratives about being Black, male, creative, and young.”<sup>5</sup> Or walk over to Express Newark to the enveloping realism of *Picturing Black Girlhood: Moments of Possibility*, rendered through the eyes of Black women and girls, artists ages 8-94, which as curator, artist, and activist, Scheherazade Tillet says: “puts Black girls in the center as subjects, artists, and theorists of their own lives.” – something that her own power-grabbing art does in the accompanying exhibit at Project Empty Space, *Black Girl Play*.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bisabutler.com/about>.

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Willis, Tyler Mitchell's *Redefining Portraits*, *The New Yorker*, August 1, 2020.

And, as I circle back to the seriousness of the moment of whitewashing that we are in, the rampant fears of those who rule that they will be sidelined, shall we say replaced, as I too confront the privilege of my whiteness to be seen, at least sometimes, as who I want to be, I come back to the power of socially-engaged art to force those moments of possibility to be more equitably spread, and especially to let the real sounds ring out, as the great Regina Carter does with her leadership in the NJPAC All-Female Jazz Residency, a throw back or shall we say throw forward from her own start in Straight Ahead, an all-female jazz quintet. Yes, there are moments of possibility rendered throughout the history of Black Art, be it rendered on photographic paper, quilted canvases, in the words of a play or the sounds of a violin, and those moments recapture the revelation of history, told truthfully, and in full color. And, I am quite sure that the dialogues that these forthright artists will have today with Deborah Willis, Linda Harrison, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Kamilah Forbes will burst through the gag rules of our time to say the word, reparations, and unpack this moment of possibility for Newark and beyond.