

essay

# The Legitimization of Miz Culchure Lady

By Carlton Turner

Nayo Barbara Malcolm Watkins, or Mama Nayo, as I, and many of her movement children, know her, was a Southern institution. She was a welcoming mentor, loving mother, fierce organizer, and an unapologetic poet. She passed away in 2007, but she left a legacy of wisdom behind, including the following words:

*"[Our] predicament is one of justifying the holistic keeping of culture and the functional use of art for people's sake in an arena that understands and rewards art for art's sake."*

 Program listing from AFP's Mississippi Project featuring Junebug Productions, Roadside Theater, and Urban Bush Women \ Program listing from AFP's Mississippi Project featuring Junebug Productions, Roadside

Mama Nayo wrote these words in her article *Miz Culchure Lady* in the summer of 1991 as part of her role as Coordinator for the Mississippi edition of the American Festival Project (AFP). The American Festival Project was founded in 1982 by John O'Neal of the Free Southern Theater and Dudley Cocke of Roadside Theater, as a response to a national increase in Ku Klux Klan activity. In 1991 AFP partnered with arts organizations throughout the state of Mississippi to present The Carpetbag Theater, Liz Lerman's Dance Exchange, Robbie McCauley, Junebug Productions, Roadside Theater, and Urban Bush Women in what could possibly be one of the most important statewide arts projects in Mississippi history. Collectively, these companies have contributed to the legitimization of deep and sustained community engagement as a respected art form. As a Mississippian, I am unable to cite a comparable event.

In the preface to that same essay for AFP, Mama Nayo went on to say:

*"They [culture bearers] are found throughout the country, but particularly in Mississippi and places like Mississippi where the struggle for control of the arts has not been won by commercialism, and the arts still exist as viable community vehicles."*

I am invoking these names and ideas for a number of reasons.

First, the struggle to legitimize work that falls outside the narrow confines of top-down labels within the arts world is nothing new. Nayo Watkins, John O'Neal, and Dudley Cocke have been innovators of storytelling in service of community cultural development. Their work functions as part of a continuum of cultural practices held deeply by southern communities and as

pioneers they continue to pass their collective wisdom on to each generation of singers, poets, performers, writers, and makers they encounter, either personally or through their respected canon of work.

Second, John O'Neal, Linda Parris-Bailey and Dudley Cocke were also founding members of Alternate ROOTS, an organization that has nurtured community engagement as a southern strategy since its founding in 1976 and one that I have had the honor to lead since 2009. Baba John would often say, "people learn more from what they do, than from what is done to them." Another version of the *teach a man to fish* parable and an important reminder to all sectors of how learning happens.

Finally, Mama Nayo, Baba John, Dudley, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Liz Lerman, and Linda Parris-Bailey have all mentored me in my own community-accountable cultural practice. These generous creatives are the ones I think of when the language of social practice, cultural organizing, and community-based art is tossed about at conferences, workshops, and convenings. They have contributed to a body of work that shapes the landscape of practices firmly rooted in community, and throughout their careers have challenged the restrictive frameworks of the national arts and culture sector.

With these truths as my foundation, I reviewed Helicon Collaborative's recent report *Mapping the Landscape: Socially Engaged Artistic Practice*. The report resonated in many respects, but I was also struck by some of the fault lines in the language of the report. Paying attention to language is not a small act. Linguistic terms legitimized by our sector become the secret passwords for institutional access and funding. And achieving equity in our field requires those supporting socially engaged art to be more rigorous in the definitions related to their philanthropic interests and the funding trends that follow. (The true impact of this work might not be seen for 10 to 20 years and needs at least that much of an investment to actually reverse or dismantle counter-community institutional practices. Does the philanthropic sector have the patience to see a body of work through a twenty or fifty-year investment strategy?) But achieving cultural equity *also* requires artists to be defter at understanding the nuances of their own practice. Artists have to be careful not to constrict the expansiveness of their work, and instead work to clarify their intentions.

**Community-based Art** For example, the use of community-based arts/artist as a label has been a dividing term in the art sector for decades. The term has been used as a kinder placeholder for "inferior artistic product," challenging the legitimacy of artistic work that is focused on the people, versus those practices that focus on the artist. "Community-based arts" is a term filled with classism and is a powerfully effective tool in segregating artists—using virtuosity and training pedigree as measurements of quality. In contrast, Helicon's working definition of socially engaged art places community transformation at the center of this genre of artistic practice. Their definition emphasizes community change, unfortunately, most of the work I see that self-defines as "socially engaged" lacks the rigor and analysis necessary to make significant shifts in a community's health, wellness, or state of being. Just because someone uses these terms to describe their work doesn't indicate they hold any level of proficiency in its methods, nor does it indicate any legitimacy within the communities where they work. Socially engaged art, as a moniker, provides access to those with the language, while simultaneously creating barriers for those who are doing this work, but lack the language.

**Social Practice Art** This phenomenon becomes more entrenched in the growing trend of institutionalizing "social practice art" within colleges and universities. These institutions carry the weight of historic tensions between college and community and create a challenging environment to hone a practice of social engagement. Tragically, the university arts system has been a platform for individual artistic development and a reflection of the American dream's emphasis on individual achievement, an antithetical approach to making socially engaged art defined in this report. It is a system that gives legitimacy to the myth of the charismatic leader elevated as the source of change, ideas, and vision. Socially engaged art as an approach is as much about dismantling power as it is about elevating genius.

**Cultural Organizing** I was excited to see the term cultural organizing used in this report. I have been using this term since it was shared with me by Tufara Waller Muhammad during her time at the Highlander Resource and Education Center. The Highlander Center, which sits in the Appalachian Mountains, has an 80-plus year history of using arts and culture to organize poor and marginalized communities across the US South, and was also the birthplace of Alternate ROOTS. Tufara shared a definition of cultural organizing that is specifically connected to using cultural strategies, grounded in transformative community-centered processes, to advance a particular policy framework or agenda. The definition she shared also centers wellness as an essential strategy. The intent of the practice is to shift the way people live, not just what they feel.

**The Language of Ethics** In artistic work that centers community an artist's ethics is their lifeline. And in the section of this report that featured ethics there was a key element that I wanted to show up: **consistency**. The work of advancing cultural transformation through artistic process requires more of the artist than to just show up. It requires them to be present, keep engaging and come back. Work to see yourself as part of the community you are working with. Recognize that the issues the community is dealing with are just as much a part of your own struggle. If you cannot connect to the community's struggle, then you probably shouldn't be doing your work there. The community is not the space for saviors.

**Moving Forward** The ability to research the body of “socially-engaged art and artists” in our field is wrought with challenge. I have no interest in further segregating a heavily segregated field. My thoughts here are meant to provide clarity on the perspective from which I read and digested Helicon’s findings. I appreciate *Mapping the Landscape* and Helicon’s own intention to bring clarity to important terms that are often used interchangeably. There is a pressing need to make socially engaged art visible in the world and to understand the long-term impact of the approaches artists are taking. Their report creates a space for the field and community to have a more complicated and sophisticated conversation about what this work is and what it isn’t...but only if we take a cue from “Miz Culchure Lady” and use this opportunity to engage in critical discourse as a platform for the development of strategies that lead us closer towards our collective liberation.

Onward!

#### About the Author

Carlton Turner is a builder, avid BBQer, husband, father, aspiring artist and sixth generation Mississippian. Carlton is the executive director of Alternate ROOTS and the founding director of the Mississippi Center for Cultural Production. He can be found on social media [@solsta999](#).

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