

Kelundra Smith Artist Statement

I am a storyteller whose mission is to connect people to cultural experiences and each other through the written word. I started writing when I was seven years old, scribbling on the back of receipts, bills, walls, and any surface where I could leave a bit of my imagination. Theatre captures our imaginations by creating powerful tableaux of new possibilities. I intend to restore Black people's place in the American theatrical canon and carry our stories around the world.

The stories I tell are rooted in history, and I hope that by going back, we can see ourselves more clearly. South African photographer Zunele Muholi says "we must attach images to freedom." By writing plays rooted in the Black, southern tradition, my goal as a playwright is to offer people from marginalized groups stories that inspire them to imagine greater possibilities for themselves. If our ancestors could do it, so can we.

As a Georgia native and the eldest of two children, my stories are inspired by the unique experience of being just four generations removed from chattel slavery. My mother grew up in Decatur, Georgia, a suburb just east of Atlanta with her mother, father, and five older siblings. One of the formative stories in my family is that my grandmother asked the wealthy white family for whom she worked for a raise and they said no. My grandfather and uncles told her not to go back and she never returned. Thirty years later, when my grandmother died, the white children she raised came to her funeral and cried as if they had lost their own mother.

My father was born in Chicago, Illinois at Cook County Public Hospital. His mother died due to childbirth-related complications. His father knew he wasn't up to the task of raising four children alone, so my great grandmother took a train from Selma, Alabama to the Windy City to get him and raise him on the family farm. The other three were raised in Chicago by my grandfather's older sister who had married a successful dentist and entrepreneur.

There is no telling the stories that have been planted on my heart to tell without acknowledging how their origin stories form mine. The Black American experience is a divine one defined by fortitude, triumph and audacity. My plays offer a glimpse into the lives of those who beat the odds and laughed on the other side.

A Working Title Playwrights Membership would greatly benefit me on my artistic journey for many reasons:

1. I am an established theater critic, but a very early career playwright. WTP offers access to a network of writers, directors, and dramaturgs that I cannot access on my own.
2. Writing is often a lonely craft and having outside eyes on my work will help me to see what the fixes are to get these plays where they need to be for production.
3. Financially, writing workshops and master classes can be very costly. I am usually unable to participate in more than one or two a year on my own. This scholarship could completely transform my work as a writer.

I admire the community and opportunity that WTP has created for Georgia playwrights over the years. It would be a privilege to be a part of this dynamic group with the Molette Scholarship.