

Conversations on Food Justice: Food Justice and the Arts

Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College

May 23, 2023

IN A NUTSHELL

When most people think about solutions for food insecurity and hunger, they think of economics, policy, or agriculture. The arts aren't usually top of mind. The panelists for this session make the case that the arts can and has been an important tool in the fight for food justice.

The arts connect peoples' hearts and minds; they can open doors and pocketbooks. They have made a difference in other social issues – Hiram Larew reminds us of the poem "[The New Colossus](#)" etched into the base of the Statue of Liberty, inviting immigrants to the New World, which represented an ethos of welcome for decades.

However, there is a delicate balance to strike. Von Diaz, a documentarian and cookbook author, speaks of the tightrope she walks to accurately document families living in less than favorable circumstances while preserving their dignity and celebrating all they do have. Stephen Towns creates visual art that celebrates Black and Brown laborers who have long worked in the background, elevating the significant role they have played in building our nation's economy. When that balance is found, the results can be powerful and generate impact for communities worldwide.

- Quote: You can take a beautiful image of a community that is struggling... and inspire someone to learn more about them and inspire them to potentially give. The intentionality of the process of capturing these images... draws someone in. **The world needs the people who draw people in.** – Von Diaz



KEY TAKEAWAYS/QUOTES

- **An important role of artists is to restore or maintain dignity.** It can be easy to look at photographs and stories from developing countries and see what they might lack from a developed world lens— shoeless children, eating off of a mat on the floor. But there is also beauty there – a family gathering to eat a delicious meal that was prepared with love. So, the honor and challenge for the artist is to ensure that the reality of the circumstances are laid bare – while the humanity and dignity of people also shine through.
- **One way to bring that lens is to collaborate with local artists.** When Von Diaz traveled to Madagascar to document local food cultures, she worked with a local photographer who had been travelling to the remote village that was only accessible by water to be her eyes on the ground. Because he had visited the village before, and spoke the local dialect, he was able to see things that unfamiliar eyes would have missed; he was able to pull out the beauty in the everyday lives of the Vaso people.



- **Acknowledge the harm of visiting communities and work to diminish it.** Stephen Towns argued that simply by entering a community as an outsider, you are doing some harm. The goal should always be to harm as little as possible. He often works with majority white students in Baltimore, which is a largely Black community. He encourages the students to be aware of how they act as they take tours of local neighborhoods, encouraging them to be mindful of their reactions and their impact. He encourages them to act with empathy.
- **Art can bring attention to the overlooked.** One of Stephen Towns' biggest works was his extraordinary art exhibit (Stephen Towns: Declaration and Resistance) focused on the role of Black labor to demonstrate the role of Black communities in building the country's economy. In particular, he highlighted cooks that worked behind the scenes to create experiences that they themselves could not access. One of the women he highlighted was Elsie Henderson, who worked for a prominent family in Pittsburg and made sure every meal was perfect for the family she served; yet she was never able to sit at the table.
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- Hiram had a writing residency at Woodlawn Plantation, which in the past had been home to 9 white people who were served by 90 enslaved Black people, many of who are not named in any historical accounts. Hiram invited four Black poet friends to join him and write about the challenges, joys and sorrows of those enslaved people, bringing voice and feeling to their realities. Three agreed to take on the challenge, and together they created the [Voices of Woodlawn](#).

Quote: Will poetry solve hunger? No, I don't believe it can. Will it help? I absolutely believe it can. I believe it can change minds, open up hearts as well as wallets and purses and make people realize, in ways that perhaps they never did, that hunger not only can touch them, but touches absolutely somebody that they know.- Hiram Larew

SPARKS OF HOPE

- There is a groundswell of interest in the Arts from both the artist community and science community. Poetry or visual arts may not solve hunger, but it can play a key role in helping to change minds, raise awareness and inspire action. Especially art about hunger; not everyone has experienced hunger themselves, but they know someone who has been touched by it. There is hope that poetry and art will create opportunities to connect.
 - Young people bring hope. College students today are so well informed about all sorts of societal ills; they've heard about it from a very young age. Because it is so familiar and they see the world through new eyes, they will come up with solutions that the older generations never could have thought of. They already are spreading the word through videos, TikTok and all forms of social media.
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CONTINUED LEARNING AND ACTION



Read the [collection of poetry](#) related to hunger, founded by Hiram Larew, and listen to Brian James reading his poem [Testimony](#).



Check out [Von Diaz' work](#), and taste her Puerto Rican [recipes](#)



Keep an eye out for Von's next cookbook, [Islas: A Celebration of Tropical Cooking](#)



Find Stephen Towns' work in collections near you and check his [work online](#).



If you find yourself in the Research Triangle in Durham, NC, have a meal at [Lantern Restaurant](#).



Advocate with colleges to include scholarships connecting the arts and sciences

FEATURED PANELISTS



Von Diaz is an [Emmy Award](#)-winning documentarian, food historian, and author of [Islas: A Celebration of Tropical Cooking](#). *Senior Producer at StoryCorps*



Hiram Larew is Founder, *Poetry X Hunger*. Bringing a World of Poetry to the Anti-Hunger Cause and Retired (2015) Director of International Programs, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, US Department of Agriculture



Stephen Towns is a fiber artist and figurative painter, and the inaugural recipient of the 2016 Municipal Art Society of Baltimore Travel Prize, and in 2021, Towns was the first Black artist-in-residence at the Fallingwater Institute, located at Frank Lloyd Wrights' renowned Fallingwater house in Pennsylvania



Corby Kummer (moderator) is executive director of [Food & Society at the Aspen Institute](#), a senior lecturer at the Tufts Friedman School of Nutrition Science, and a senior editor of *The Atlantic*.

Thank you



From left to right: Anne Filipic (CEO Share Our Strength), Hiram Larew, Von Diaz, Stephen Towns, Elliott Gaskins (vice-president of development at Share Our Strength), Corby Kummer.