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Highlander Center: Hotlines and Cultural Bazaars

Je Naé Taylor¹

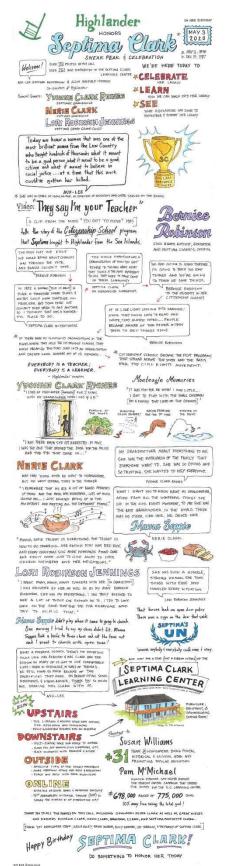
Since the pandemic's arrival, Highlander has created specially tailored on-line community-building spaces, programs, and re-granting opportunities for artists working at the intersection of cultural production and social change. This report documents two examples. The first is a "Cultural Workers Hotline" for BIPOC artists to share struggles, needs, and strategies for (a) coping with the impact of the pandemic on their livelihoods and (b) creating change-oriented artistic responses to the pandemic in their communities. Highlander staff have held multiple weekly virtual spaces for all of our programs, and each gathering has employed an artist to be a graphic note taker. Illustrations are part of this report.

The second are Cultural Bazaars which use theatre skills including stage design, costume, spectactors, games, images, forum and legislative theatre to be a forum for our people to engage and expand the fullness of their lives. The report includes two videos which document a Bazaar.

Since 1932 the Highlander Center has been gathering people. We are a catalyst for people. A bridge. A hill. A ground. A circle. And we intend to continue fostering the kind of cultural sharing that we have always encouraged. Those who are community culture workers and community cultural bearers need more time together to explore common concerns in greater depth. They need more space to deal creatively with the many sensitive aspects of communicating clearly across cultural lines.

We are convinced that we must continue to learn together how we build the grassroots movement to reclaim control of our culture and assess its value and traditions through analysis, teaching, learning, and actions. We have come to recognize a profound need for people to not only tell their stories but to tell them right and by doing so carve space that says we are here and this is what we have done and we won't go away.

¹ Je Nae Taylor is a Cultural Organizer at the Highlander Center, which is a catalyst for grassroots organizing and movement building in Appalachia and the South. We work with people fighting for **justice**, equality and sustainability, supporting their efforts to take collective action to shape their own destiny. More information about the Highlander Center can be found at https://www.highlandercenter.org/.

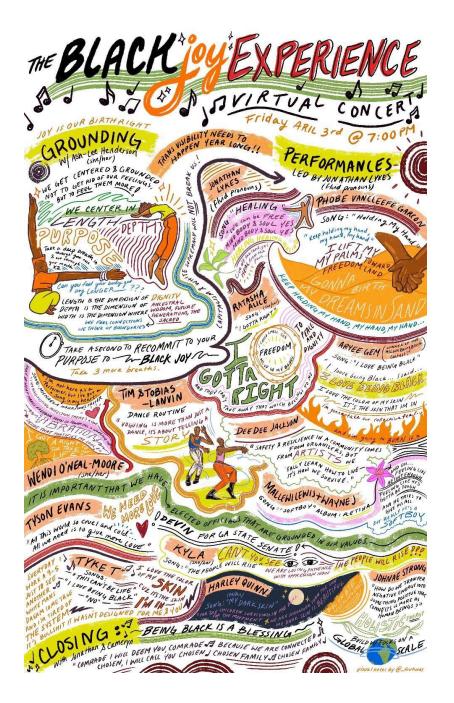


We know that artists help create the worlds we yearn for, making it possible to experience the liberation we're seeking. Our work with artists comes most alive through our methodology of cultural organizing, which is the practice of combining the cultural traditions of people (spirituality, wellness, faith traditions) with people's artistic and cultural productions (art, theatre, music, dance, food) to shift policy and practice at the interpersonal, local, state, and regional levels (and beyond). The majority of Highlander's work happens in and across marginalized urban and rural communities, specifically those comprised of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, working-class and cash poor white people, and LGBTQ+ folks in the region. Although not exclusively an arts-based organization, we have always centered cultural organizing and cultural work as fundamental to the educational work we move into the region, nation, and world. Highlander is a capacity builder and connector for artists and changemakers who often slip through the cracks, creating space for them to refine their practice and gain access to critical resources to survive as artists and as people. Where the intersection of crises and oppressive systems (such as COVID-19 and anti-Black state violence) hit the hardest is where you will find Highlander's staff and participants working together to respond to direct needs while also envisioning and creating a better world. We are among the longest serving grassroots intermediaries working with social movements in the region, which gives us the opportunity to connect artists, cultural workers, and change-makers across generations.



In January 2020 we began asking "What is the recipe for culture at this time?". Between January and March we traveled and gathered groups of up to 30 people to ask this question. In those gatherings we ate, occupied space, laughed, held hands, agitated one another's ideas and put forth effort to really interrogate how we defined culture and what we put into its recipe. Since the pandemic's arrival, we have engaged nearly 20,000 new people virtually, mostly from the region, with a special focus on specially tailored on-line communitybuilding spaces, programs, and re-granting opportunities for artists working at the intersection of cultural production and social change.

Two examples stand out. First, within the first few weeks of March, Highlander convened over 500 Black, Brown, and Indigenous artists from across the region and US on a "Cultural Workers Hotline" to share struggles, needs, and strategies for (a) coping with the impact of the pandemic on their livelihoods and (b) creating change-oriented artistic responses to the pandemic in their communities. Secondly, Highlander staff have held multiple weekly virtual spaces for all of our programs, and each gathering has employed an artist to be a graphic notetaker, which means we are creating access for highly visual learners, employing underfunded artists, and generating a visual archive of hundreds of voices living through the pandemic.



We are thrilled to share how we are using theatre skills including stage design, costume, spect-actors, games, images, forum and legislation to be a forum for our people to engage and expand the fullness of their lives. Attached are some visual notes from our calls and recap videos of our Cultural Bazaar where we dared 5 Cultural Workers to answer questions about coping and engaging by creating a new piece of content in 24 hours. The world without art is eh and who wants that?

Highlander Cultural Bazaar Day 1 Video

Highlander Cultural Bazaar Day 2 Video

