

A Symbolic Up and Away

BETHEL BURYING GROUND MEMORIAL

PREPARED BY
MUHSANA ALI

INCLUDING
COLEMAN JORDAN
LAUREL MCSHERRY
JOSHUA T LESSARD
MEGAN KASSABAUM
JEREMIAH EKOJA

Bethel Burying Ground Competition

Taking place between 2019-2021, the Bethel Burying ground competition was a contest to design a memorial for a Philadelphia playground under which was discovered an ancient African American gravesite which had existed from the early 1800's.

Muhsana Ali was one of the five finalists selected to design the burying ground memorial to honor the ancestors underfoot. .

While Muhsana's work was not selected, she received high rating from the community who participated in the vote and honorable mention from the selection committee.

Muhsana produced a powerful design, created in collaboration with two architects, a landscape architect, an archeologist and an assistant from the school of architecture at Morgan State University. The work required the production of a PDF document, a 3D model design and a video presentation, all of which are included here. This work is being presented to provide an example of the level of design of which Muhsana is capable.

A SYMBOLIC UP AND AWAY (BETHEL BURYING GROUND VIDEO PRESENTATION BY MUHSANA ALI)

ONLINE VIDEO LINK:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLNR69iZAx0&ab_channel=MuhSanaAli

PROJECT DESCRIPTION BY PHILADELPHIA OFFICE OF ARTS AND CULTURE

Philadelphia Parks and Recreation and City of Philadelphia's Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy (City) and the Bethel Burying Ground Historic Site Memorial Committee (Committee), collectively "the City", issues this Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for the commissioning and installation of a site-specific public art memorial for the historic Bethel Burying Ground underneath Weccacoe Playground at 400 Catharine Street; the re-sizing of the existing full-size tennis court, which currently extends over the burying ground footprint, to a new youth tennis court to eliminate the encroachment on the footprint; the removal of the recreation center building; and any alterations to the site necessitated by memorial and youth tennis court.

During the 18th century, there was a large and growing population of free Blacks in Philadelphia, two-thirds of which lived in Southwark – a social, political, religious, and economic center for the county's Black citizens. Racism and segregation nonetheless permeated every aspect of life within the Black community – even in death. African Americans were denied the right to be buried in graveyards of white churches, and even when forced to be buried in public graveyards for the poor, indigent, and unknown, remained segregated. In 1810, Richard Allen and Mother Bethel A.M.E. trustees purchased the land at the 400 block of Queen Street to establish the Bethel Burying Ground – a safe space for all African Americans to be buried in Philadelphia – for \$1,600. Unlike existing churchyard burial grounds, interment here was not limited to congregation members, and may have been the first independent cemetery for the interment of the African American community in Pennsylvania. There are at least 3,000 and possibly more than 5,000 individuals interred at the site, and these include tradesmen, civic leaders, business owners, and more; an estimated 40% of those buried are young children. The burial ground operated between 1810 and c.1864 and was sold to the City of Philadelphia in 1889, with the clear intention to transform it into a park, which was named Weccacoe Square.

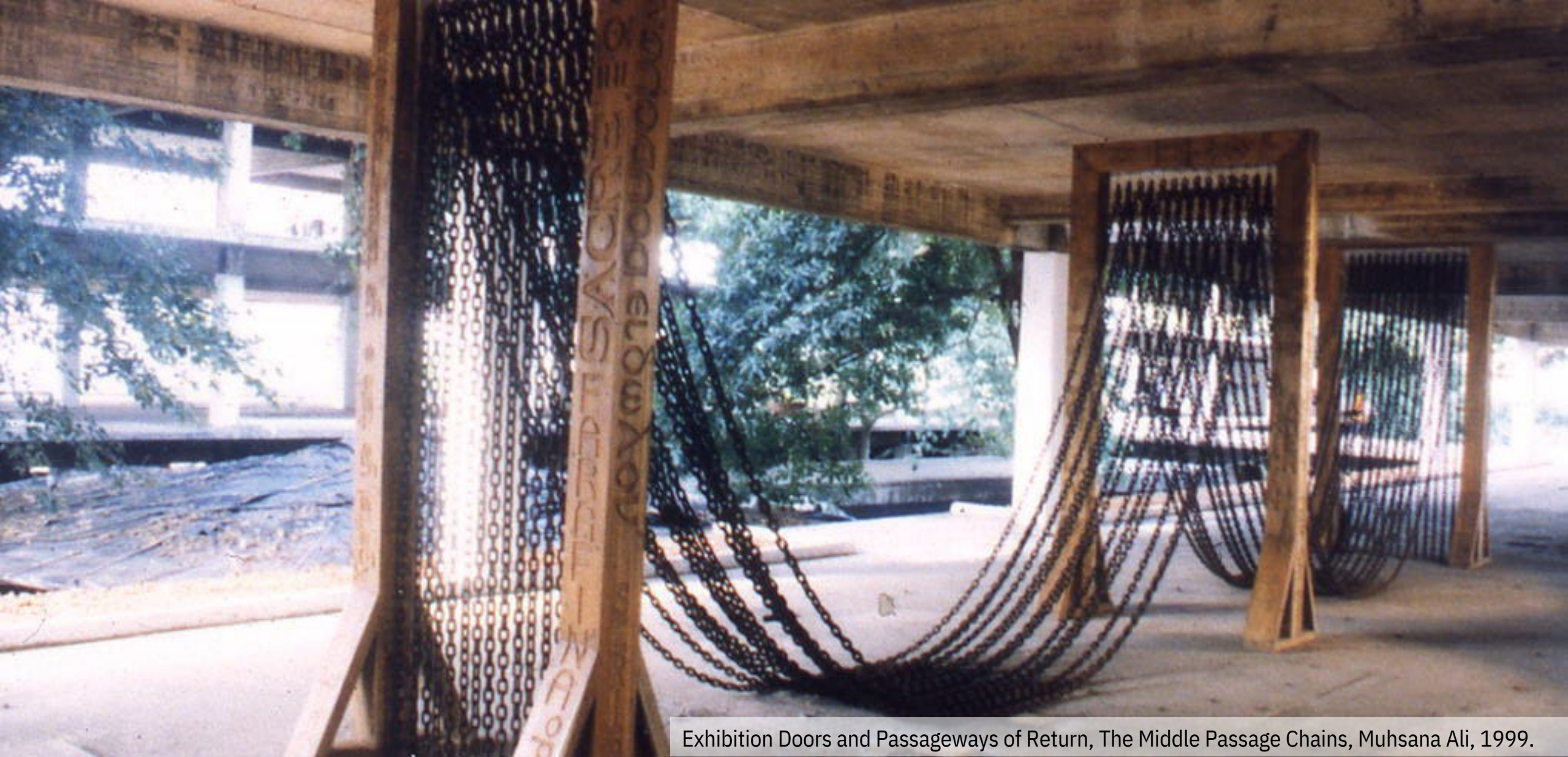
By 1950, the square was expanded to a full city block and renamed Weccacoe Playground, which it remains today. Since this sale, Weccacoe Playground has been an important and heavily used community space for the surrounding neighbors, schools, and community groups. In 2013, URS Engineers (now AECOM) conducted an archeological investigation of the burying ground. The investigation identified the precise boundaries of the historic burying ground and determined the depth below the surface at which the interred remains are situated. This was done in order to provide the information necessary to ensure that any construction activity at the site would not impact the interments, and to ensure the long-term preservation of this significant historic site. During the investigation, one artifact was uncovered from the site: the headstone of a young woman named Amelia Brown, who died in 1813 at the age of 26. The headstone is on display in the basement museum of Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church.

As a nexus for Black life in America, and due to the contributions of the Southwark neighborhood and its residents to Philadelphia's role in the birth of the nation, the Bethel Burying Ground has been added to the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and National Registers of Historic Places.



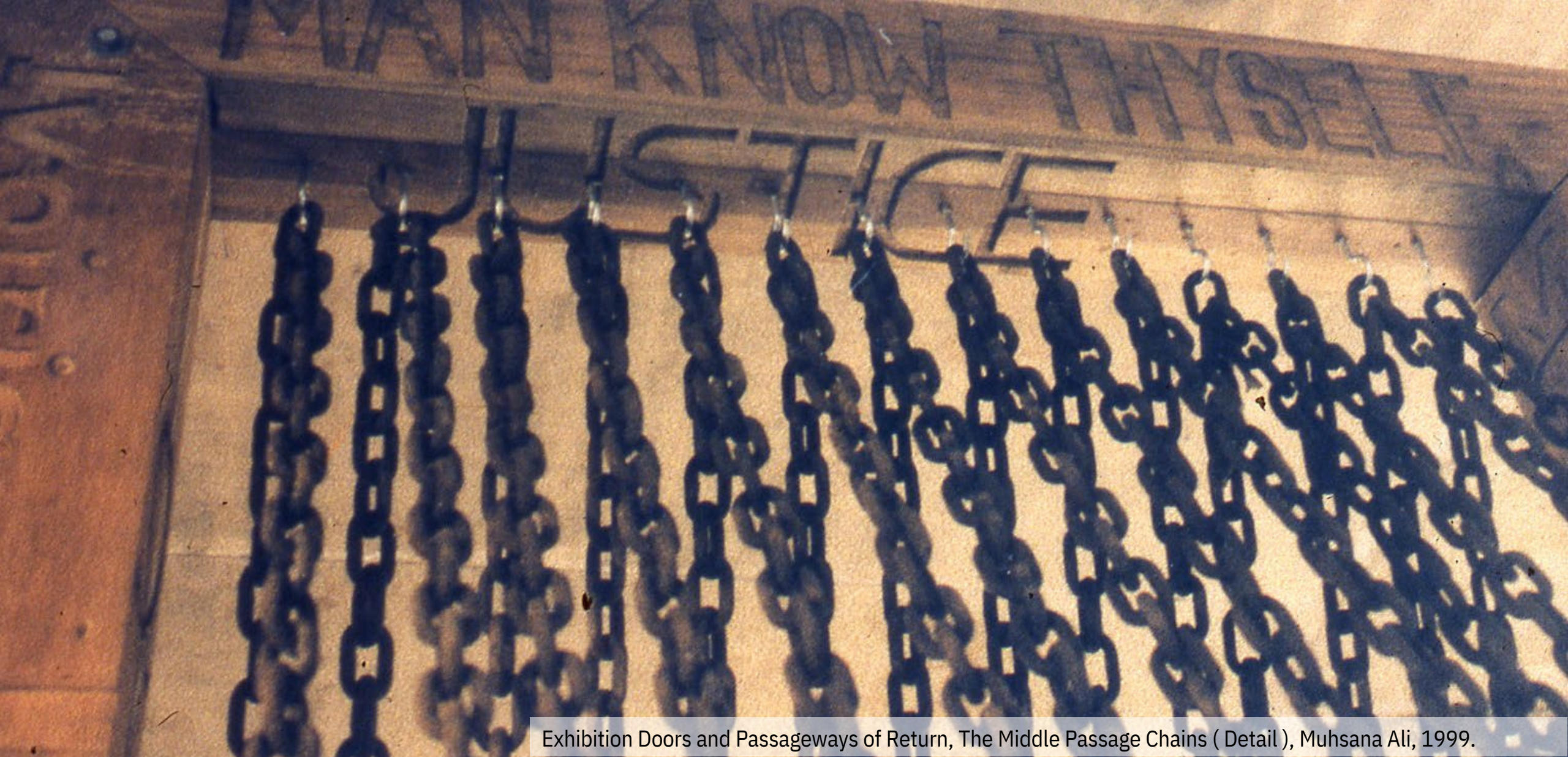
Throughout my life, I have been filled with the desire to somehow through my artwork exorcise the history my people have undergone as a result of having been enslaved in America.

That this call, over decades and travel across many oceans, has never ceased, and has finally brought me back full circle to my home and birthplace, feels profoundly moving. My family has deep roots in Philadelphia on both sides. My paternal grandmother and her sister were orphaned at an early age but kept a photo of their father who were told was born into slavery. I remember many hours of gazing at that photo filled with questions about his life before and after slavery. Due to a lineage of forced separation, my knowledge of my father's historical line ends with that great-grandfather. In discovering the history of the Bethel Burying ground, I was reminded of my great grandfather's story and wondered if some of my own ancestors could have been buried at that cemetery.



Exhibition Doors and Passageways of Return, The Middle Passage Chains, Muhsana Ali, 1999.

In 1997 I traveled to Africa to produce a two-year exhibition project on slavery entitled Doors and Passageways of Return, This work was inspired by my visits to the slave ports in Ghana and Senegal and my response to the infamous “Doors of No Return”.



Exhibition Doors and Passageways of Return, The Middle Passage Chains (Detail), Muhsana Ali, 1999.

Detail of the exhibit



Exhibition Doors and Passageways of Return, The Cotton Fields, Muhsana Ali, 1999.

It was produced in an abandoned building in the business district of the capital of Cote d'Ivoire with a gang of over 60 homeless teens I found living there.



Exhibition Doors and Passageways of Return: The Sacred Forest, Muhsana Ali, 1999.

That project and my experience with the youth led to the community centered art practice and rural art center



Exhibition Doors and Passageways of Return: Tar Baby, Muhsana Ali, 1999.

Portes et Passages Du Retour: Center for Art and Holistic Development
Mbodiene, Senegal. Which I later founded in Senegal, my secondhome for the past 19 years.

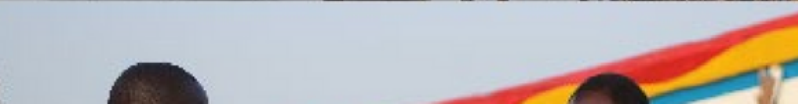
I have through my work sought to not only remind African and diaspora communities of the cultural and societal values we left behind but have made efforts to bring to light the qualities that made Africa rich and that today still serve as a reminder of our most valuable asset our, humanity. Although in 1999 I sought to bring the exhibit Porteset Passages du Retourto the US, many were not yet prepared to address this issue as directly as we are beginning to open up to today. I am hoping that the Bethel project will give me the opportunity to finally share my inspiration on this important topic here in Philadelphia, my other home.



PORTES ET PASSAGES DU RETOUR

"In this region of the world where we live and have installed our Center for Art and Holistic Development, the land is black, beautiful and rich. It is capable of offering us all we need if we approach it intelligently, adequately and appropriately..."





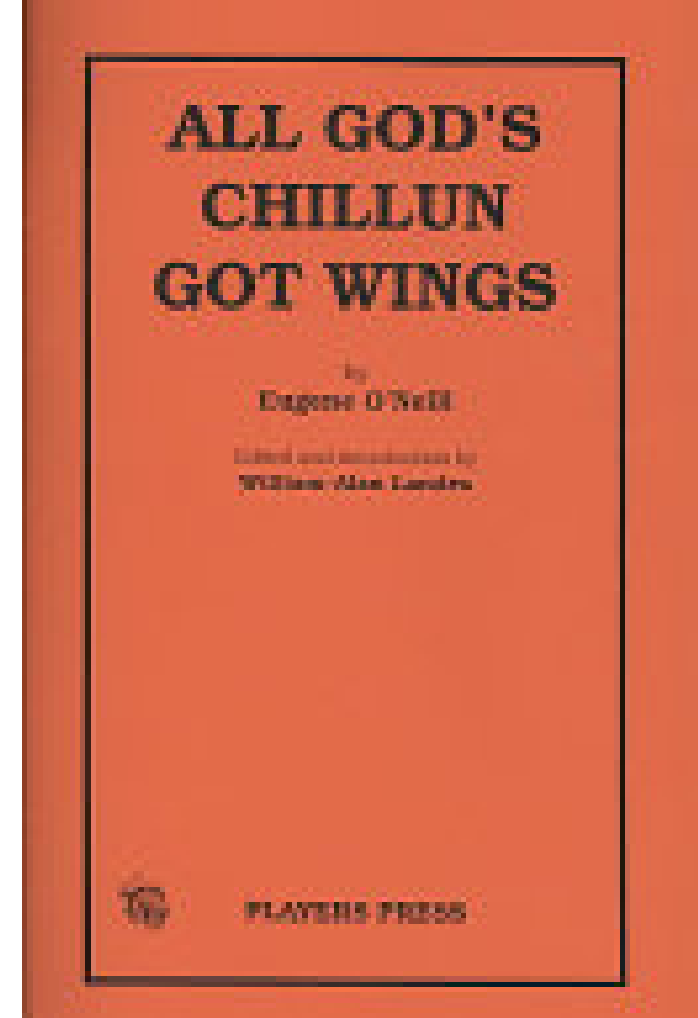
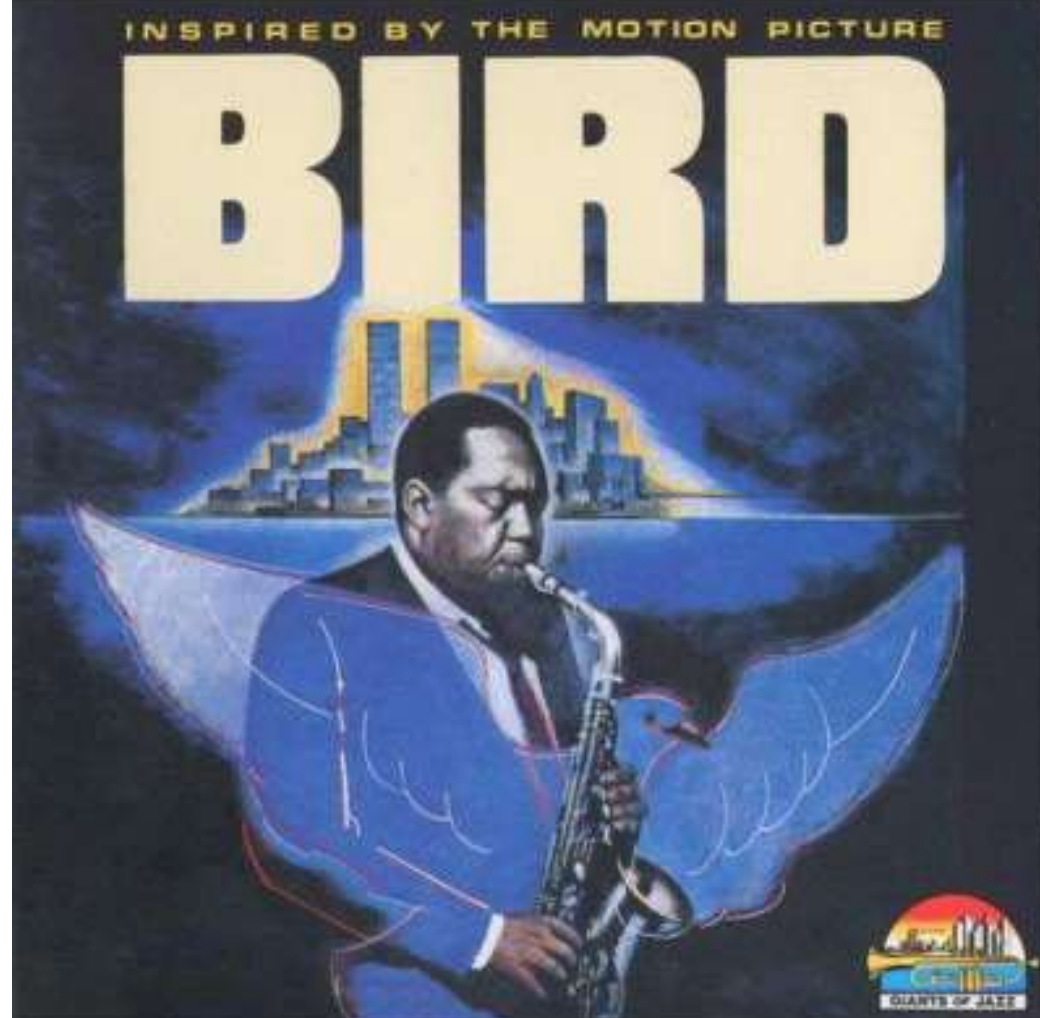
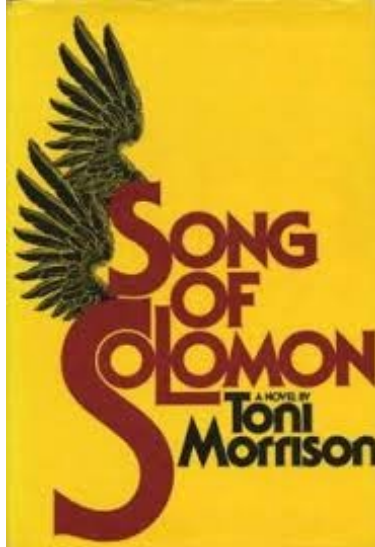
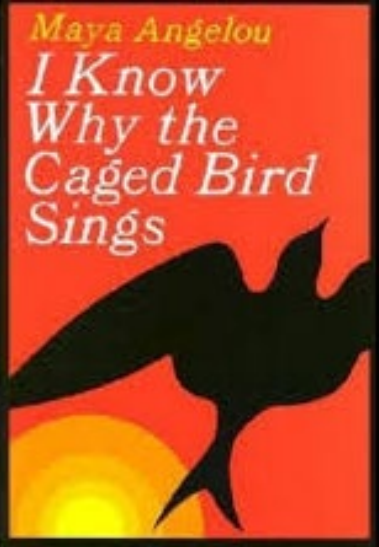
Richard Allen, the founder of the Mother Bethel AME church and the Bethel Burying ground was himself born a slave in Delaware. Then known as "Negro Richard", his mother and two siblings were sold when he was still a young boy. As a result of hard work and careful conduct, he was able to buy his freedom in 1780, at which time he became known as Richard Allen.

Like Richard Allen, a majority of free Philadelphians during the that period had experienced slavery. Free and enslaved families were naturally intertwined with free people often intermarrying enslaved. What characterized the vibrancy of that community was indeed their engagement in the struggle to gain emancipation and to assist and support their people as a whole in those days of struggle against oppression. It did not behoove the free community at that time to in any way neglect the persistent presence of slavery in America as it remained a palpable memory and threat for them and their families throughout the life of the Bethel Burying Ground, which in fact ceased to exist the year before emancipation was fully achieved.

Africans continued to be brought to America as late as 1860. Thus, the connection these people still felt to the continent was still visible and is clearly reflected in the first word given in the title Richard Allen bestowed upon his "African Methodist Episcopal Church". This memorial focuses on the ways in which our 19 century ancestors' struggle was for a freedom that links them to the legacy of the same pursuit that has continued be pursued by their descendants until the present day.



Richard Allen (1760-1831)



Sample book and album covers on the theme of “Flying”

Themes of soaring birds and flight in African American folklore, myth, music, literature and art are impossible to enumerate. The persistence of this theme well after slavery is testimony to the fact that abolition did not satisfy that yearning in the hearts of our people.



From the children's book: "The People Could Fly" By Virginia Hamilton

Toni Morrison is quoted as having said:

"...the flying myth ...it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don't care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere—people used to talk about it, it's in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful thinking—escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn't. ...?"

This work through its own form of conjuring seeks to bring validity to the myth of flying as a power or a dream of escape that has sustained Africans throughout centuries of oppression.



Lost Wax Process: Bronze Casting

The bronze birds produced in Africa by the artist accompanied by traditional bronze makers will come to America as ship cargo, just as those buried at Bethel or their ancestors, arrived. The birds serve as a conduit, made by the hands of our relatives in the homeland, conjuring through energy, intention and materials, the power they need to carry those bodies back home.

The spirituality of African descendants has always been a driving force in our ability to overcome our hardships. As such, there is a part of me that connects with that spiritual force, that interconnected power in everything: thought, touch, energy, materials that convinces me that there is a force, something real in this enormous effort (of producing these works in Africa) to actually heal and uplift those wounded souls beneath the earth who have for so long been forgotten and bulldozed over, to a place will they will find comfort, revindication and relief.

The production of Bronze sculpture in Africa dates as far back as 1500B.C. with the Bronze Age occurring in between 5,300 and 2,600 b2k. The well-known Ife bronze sculptures of Nigeria date back to 1200 A.D. , with bronze-making in Benin Dates to the 9th c. A.D. Thus, bronze-making has been an ongoing tradition in Africa for centuries. It is an artform and trade passed down in countless families over centuries. Many of the Africans captured and brought to the Americas were recorded to have been valued for their capacities in this trade and were exploited as such upon arrival. A long tradition of bronze making exists in many West African countries including Nigeria, Benin, Burkina Faso and others. These countries, known for their excellence in bronze production attract a great number of artists and clients from Europe seeking a less expensive means of professional bronze production. This team has selected to partner with a family of forgers who have produced a number of public sculptures here in Senegal and have been practicing for generations in this country.

Senegal hosts the oldest and most renowned visual art Biennale in Africa, The Dakar Biennale. Many experts in this country have experience with shipping valuable works of art in and out of the country. The technical and professional capacity of the personnel needed to execute this project in Africa is sound and well equipped.



Bronze sculptor Ben Enwonwu (1917-1994) of Nigeria



Ife bronze of Nigeria













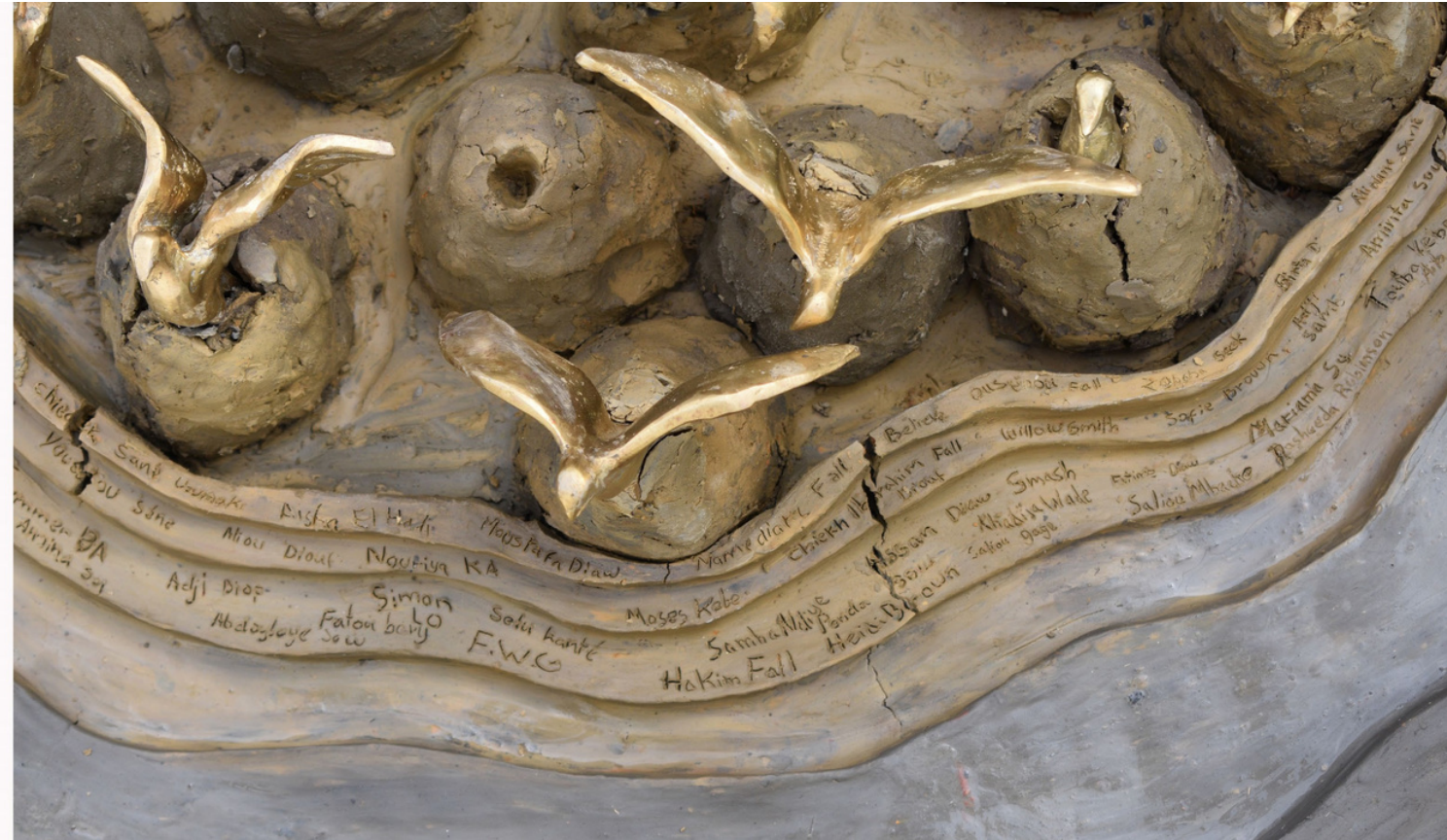




The descriptive text accompanying the work would elaborate on the lives and conditions of those buried here, this information would be further enhanced by the names symbolically charred into the staired wall surrounding the birds in the central area of the memorial.

In reference to names Toni Morrison says:

“I never knew the real names of my father's friends. Still don't. They used other names. A part of that had to do with cultural orphanage, part of it with the rejection of the name given to them under circumstances not of their choosing. If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That's a huge psychological scar. The best thing you can do is take another name which is yours because it reflects something about you of your own choice.”



As we know many black skins were branded as a means of establishing their new identity as property. In symbolically branding the names of the interred into the earth surrounding the escaping birds, I am simultaneously referencing the brandings that occurred figuratively through the renaming processes and which led to a form of cultural amnesia. These birds are symbolically leaving behind these brandings and false labels.

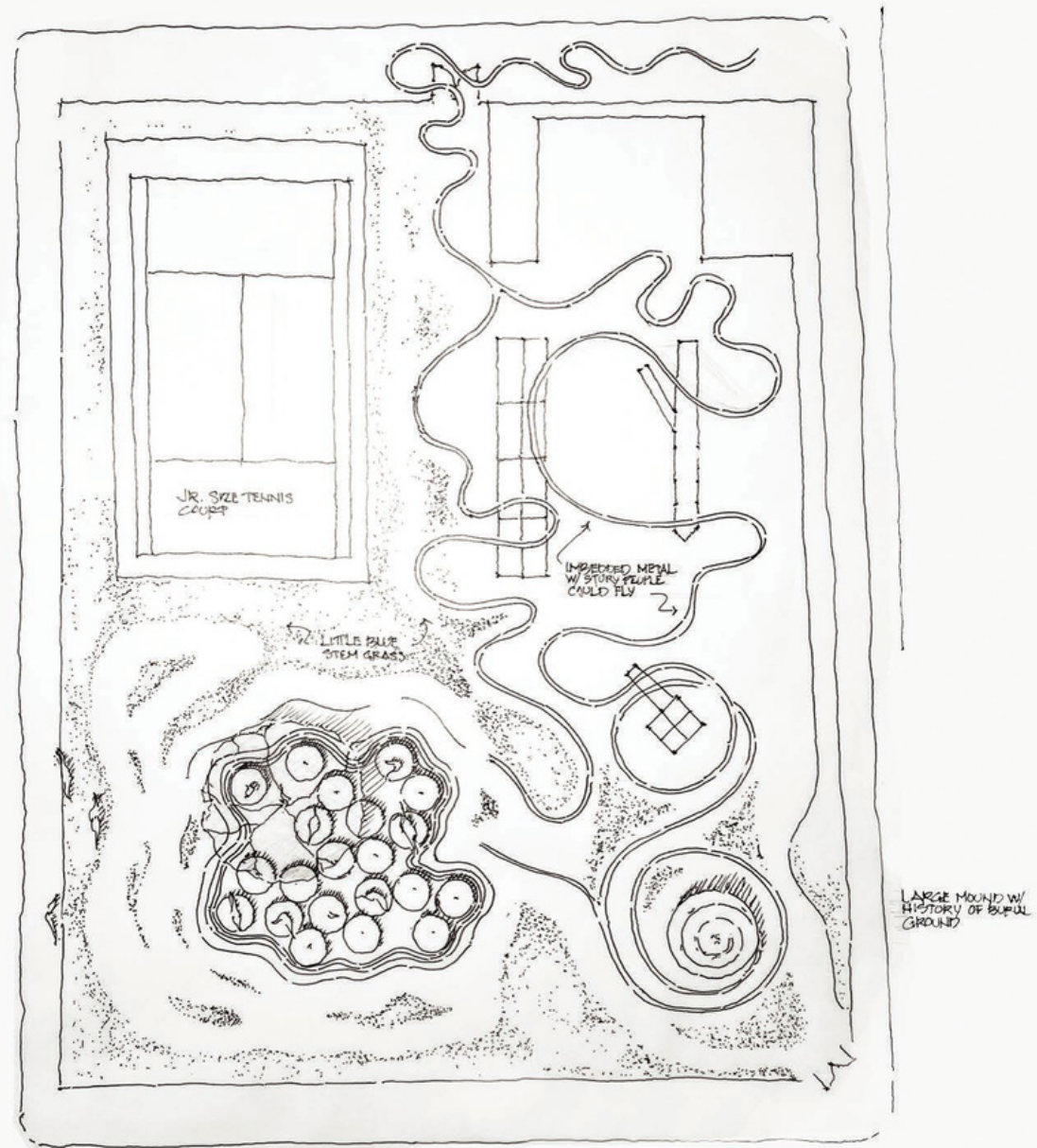


Skin branding of an enslaved person

They say the people could fly. Say that long ago in Africa, some of the people knew magic. And they would walk up on the air like climbini' up on a gate. And they flew like blackbirds over the fields. Black, shiny wings flappin' against the blue up there. Then, many of the people were captured for slavery. The ones that could fly shed their wings. The people could fly shedding wings across the water on the slave ships... Say the people could fly kept power.

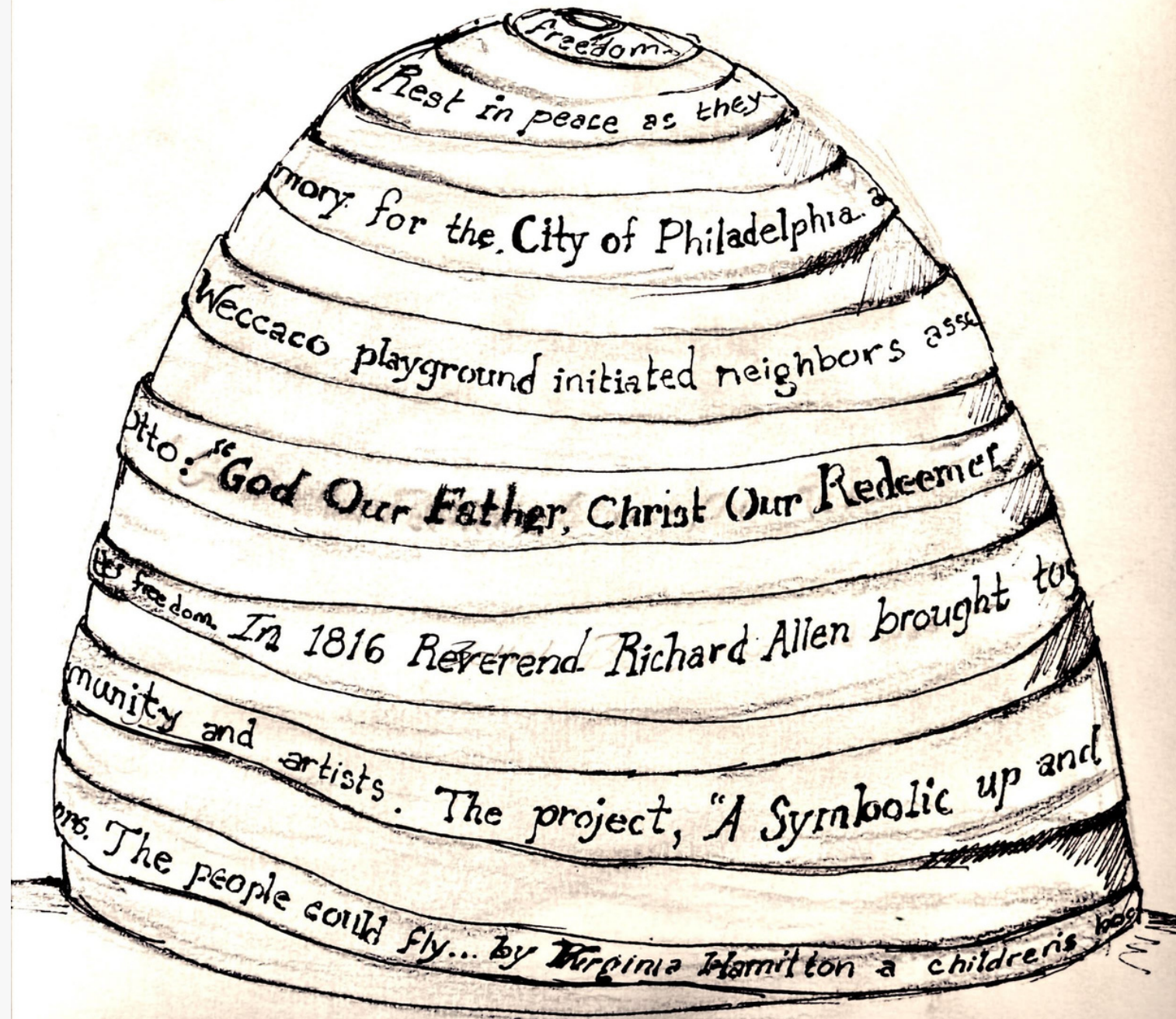
A hand-drawn illustration of a large, beehive-shaped structure with horizontal stripes, situated in a field of tall grass. A small figure is visible near the base of the structure. The drawing is done in a simple, sketchy style with black ink on a light background. The structure has a rounded, tiered top and a small opening at the bottom left. The grass is represented by several tall, thin blades. The entire scene is enclosed within a simple rectangular border.

The imposing and intriguing larger mound centrally located with the playground in one direction and the smaller mounds and birds at the other, visual entice the interest of visitors.



WECCACOE Park: BETHEL BURING
GROUND MEMORIAL

Its band of engraved words that will highlight the motto of the AME Church: "God Our Father, Christ Our Redeemer, Holy Spirit Our Comforter, Humankind Our Family", will certainly inspire visitors to approach and learn more about this history.



The four birds sitting above the Weccacoe playground fence will serve to acknowledge those ancestors buried beyond the park boundaries. Inscriptions both inside and outside the fence will inform both visitors to the exhibit and passersby on Lawrence Street of the sacred and ancestral presence beneath their feet.

Each location will also bear an inscription composed by the descendants of the interred in honor of their ancestors.



A Sahelian landscape was chosen because of its particularly dry and cracked characteristics, so reminiscent of the barren condition of the psychological state of Africans who had lost their true home and found themselves in a land that was both physically and emotionally hostile. In the vast expanse of some Sahelian landscapes, just as in the desert, one can lose one's way, but there is perhaps more hope in the former: a tuft of grass, some dry and cracked undulating surfaces, and a variety of earth textures and colors, and some trees here and there which can not only serve as mappings and markers for finding one's way back-home, but which offer hope, bestowing nourishment even in the place where one has become lost. Those who fought to bestow honor upon their people, such as Richard Allen, are like these markers in the landscape guiding us to the right path.



Sahelian Landscape

The sacred nature of the burial footprint is emphasized by the landscape which marks its perimeter. The walking path surrounding the mounds is symbolically circular in format reflecting on the interconnected nature of all things, mirroring the holistic concepts most African cultures are founded upon.







Cracked Stone Texture proposed for walking paths

The color and texture of the mounds and surrounding platforms will simulate an earthen or adobe finish but will be paved in stone to assure durability.



Little Bluestem (left), Sahelian grasses (right)

The outer corners of this landscape are filled in with a north American perennial called Little Bluestem resembling the Sahelian grasses. This plant will punctuate the curvilinear walking path of the memorial defining areas around the major trees present within the footprint. Little Blue stem has slender stems which remain blue-green throughout the summer and turn radiant shades of brown, copper and mahogany, in the winter.



Seereer Mounds

While numerous cultures in Africa and around the world have made use of mounds.-The particularity of the Seereer people whose ancient burial practice inspired this work is their claim to Nubian and ancient Egyptian ancestry, their open mounds reflecting the pyramidal objective of soul ascension.



Present-day Seereer Mounds in Senegal



Nubian Mounds at Kerma, Sudan

In shedding further light upon the Pan-African nature of my choice of mounds, according to Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegalese historian, anthropologist and physicist, “Ancient Egypt was to the rest of Africa what Greece and Rome were to the West”. Aboriginal American cultures made use of burial mounds as well. So this work also draws a deeper connection between the ancient history of this land and the African bodies that have now become a permanent part of it.



Nuri Pyramids, Sudan



Fish Farm Mounds, Hopewell Culture burial site, 100 BCE-CE 650. New Albin, Iowa. Photograph by Tom Patton.



Termite Mound, Mbodiene, Senegal

The termite hills are also inspiration for the mounds, and our mounds should approach them in color texture and size.

A public work of art should engage people of all ages. This one gives specific attention to the smallest ones. The two birds freshly exited from their mounds, exercise their wings atop the children's play space. This is a wonderful means of endowing their space with a magical presence and granting them a sense of ownership of this history. The birds emerging from their mounds will live and grow in meaning with the children of this playground. The birds will serve as real-life story book pictures that accompany the words that the children will be discovering at their feet ...with both providing food for their imaginations and dreams to soar.

The metal ribbon, winding through the play space creates a magical maze revealing a script that is easily legible for small children. Professional writers and storytellers may be engaged to produce the stories in an original and meaningful way. The ribbon can create a fascinating source of discovery for adults and children alike. This educational aspect will encourage parents to explore these stories with their children. Such moments would easily serve as opportunities for literary development and historic intrigue. We are keen to collaborate with this committee, particularly the Friends of Weccacoe Playground association and Queen Village Neighbors association about ways in which we might improve the educational transmission of the history in question.





The placement of this monument in the midst of a playground offers us the opportunity to give our children a chance to grow with an acknowledgement and awareness of something that happened, which all of our ancestors were a part of, that calls for their participation in making amends for.

Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, has been given a name that it has sadly fallen short of. This past year we witnessed an explosion of violence due to the same legacy our 19th century ancestors fought so hard to extinguish. It is time we make ourselves worthy of our name. Let us each one embrace the past and the future and break free of our own individual soil encasings that have obscured our light for so long. Taking on our brilliant shining selves, let us come into our light bodies of truth, compassion, forgiveness and love; spread our majestic wings and fly -together into a place of light, truth and integrity, whereas a true human family, we were always intended to be.