

Kelundra Smith Artist Statement

I am a writer who uplifts the voices of people who time has forgotten, either intentionally or unintentionally. Through stories, I remind the collective we of our shared humanity by excavating the souls of those who live(d) in obscurity. I believe that the past is the best teacher we have, and that the liberation blueprint lives there and inside of each of us.

I am the daughter of Black southern parents who are the children of Black southern parents who were the children of Black southern parents. The geography and culture of the South form my being and inform my work. It looks like pine needles blowing in the breeze; smells like earth after the rain; sounds like jazz and gospel in equal measure; and tastes like collard greens with turkey necks. This is my American experience.

As the descendant of people who were denied access to the written word for centuries because of state sanctioned oppression, I see my plays as restorative narratives. My work delves into the lives of people who were unafraid to abandon the familiar, start over, and risk losing everything in the name of self-determination. By writing historical fiction rooted in the Black, southern tradition, my goal is to empower people from historically excluded groups and inspire them to imagine greater possibilities for themselves. My motto is if our ancestors could do it, so can we.

The Reconstruction Trilogy highlights the trials and triumphs of Black Georgians after the Civil War. "Younger," an imagined prequel to Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun," peels back the layers on Walter Sr. and Lena's journey from the South to the North during The Great Migration in search of better opportunities. "Other Paths To God," which is a commission from Horizon Theater and the National New Play Network, goes into the lives of nurses at a crossroads in the careers and spiritual lives during a harrowing pandemic.

I value working in artistic spaces where people are encouraged to show up as their authentic selves. On any project, large or small, I strive to cultivate creativity, curiosity, humor, and innovation. Informed by my years as a freelance journalist, research and interviews are central to my practice. Most importantly, speaking to people who feel unheard and allowing them to narrate their experiences drives my way of working. Our stories are what make us unique, and it's imperative for me to leave people with the feeling that they haven't lost their agency.

My stage plays and screen plays focus on the brilliance and resilience exhibited by Black people, for the benefit of all. My elders mopped floors for free and marched across them for freedom. I am challenging people who experience my work to question the stories they tell in their families and social groups as well as the stories they have been told about America. Imagining a vibrant future for Black people and other people of color is central to my work, because our best days are before us.