



THE CONCILIATION PROJECT

By The Editors

A s a commissioned project for Commonwealth, The Conciliation Project (TCP) created a new performance titled **COMMON/wealth & COMMON/debt**. TCP is a non-profit social justice theatre company with a mission “to promote through active and challenging dramatic work open and honest dialogue about racism and systems of oppression in America in order to repair its damaging legacy.” Their performances begin with research: they interview diverse groups of citizens and collaboratively develop a script based on the voices and ideas they encounter. They used this methodology to construct **COMMON/wealth & COMMON/debt**, building from TCP’s facilitation of part of **Summer Sessions: Commonwealth** in 2019. Based on conversations with Richmond citizens, their new production responds both to deep histories and the upheavals of 2020, including the coronavirus pandemic and racial justice protests. Originally planned as a live performance, due to COVID-19 the project shifted into a work for broadcast. The resulting work combines footage filmed on location at key sites around Richmond with a live performance in ICA’s auditorium—first screened on November 15, 2020

in tandem with a live talk-back and Q + A featuring two of The Conciliation Project's leaders—founder Tawnya Pettiford-Wates and collaborator Dr. Ram Bhagat. They extend that conversation in the written text that follows.

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***The COMMON/wealth & COMMON/debt Project: An Overview
Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, PhD, and Ram Bhagat, EdD***

The collaboration with the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU and Richmond based The Conciliation Project is designed to be a multimedia journey and interrogation into how we, as a community, acknowledge, define, and contextualize living in the Commonwealth of Virginia and how the specific identifier of “being a commonwealth” impacts our communities, our lives, and our psyche. This collaboration began as a conversation with various artists, community organizers, educators, and participants as we asked the question of what “the commonwealth” means to them, which took place over a period of months in the spring and summer of 2019. These community conversations and artistic introspections inspired more questions and an abundance of “call outs” from activists, organizers, and community members all over the Richmond, Virginia (RVA) area. In bringing the process of interrogation and community comment to a close, we decided that we needed to address the community’s concerns and the issues raised with an artistic response. That response evolved into a performance piece that was devised through direct interviews, improvisation, historic research, and engaged community outreach.

COMMON/wealth & COMMON/debt is a live performance on film. It includes several vignettes with video documentation from underrepresented historic sites, as well as highly controversial sites, monuments, and RVA landmarks that we used as our backdrop for the artistic rendering of our performance piece in final production. We collected hundreds of stories, anecdotes, memories, and experiences from the people of RVA specifically interrogating the meaning and context of “the commonwealth” from their perspectives. Using that material, we created a representative account of the historic legacy of RVA residents using verbatim theatre, ritual poetic drama, fable, song, and music to look at who we are in RVA and what we can do to embrace our problematic history while simultaneously addressing our “collective” well-being as a community. Can we reconcile our past with our present in order to build a future together? Can we embrace our identity as a “commonwealth” and find demonstrable ways in which to walk that out with shared resources and equitable access?

Due to the multiple pandemics of COVID-19 and America’s racial reckoning, we had to radically adjust our process and the timeline for creating the work. There were numerous delays due to lockdowns and health concerns, and many of the activities, workshops, and events we had planned with various communities and community groups had to be cancelled. This was exacerbated by the civil disobedience and unrest that erupted in RVA and throughout the world after the heinous murder of George Floyd, filmed live and released on television. In considering that event combined with the murders, just weeks before, of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, we reshaped our initial proposal and planned project to be responsive to what was happening on the ground and in the ethos of our current times. We had to stop

and reexamine the ways in which the violent past of Richmond, the former capital of the Confederacy, has not only impacted our past but rests firmly on the ground where we stand today. Additionally, we were compelled to interrogate with greater scrutiny the formative role that the Commonwealth of Virginia played in the chattel slavery enterprise and the slaveocracy state, given the racial unrest and new awakening that the entire nation was experiencing, with specific focus on Richmond and our infamous Monument Avenue.

Ultimately, we engaged the Applied Theatre class from VCU's theatre department in the project to do a lot of the community interviews and make proposals as to how to theatricalize these interviews and stories into a performance for the public. Although the student proposals were for a class assignment, their research was invaluable to us as our timeline for production was severely affected by all of the unforeseen delays and new production conditions. We employed a group of professional artists to begin putting this performance piece together, and collectively we devised *COMMON/wealth & COMMON/debt*. In the process, we used improvisational techniques and character work to create original songs from poetic writing and revised traditional folk and spiritual songs from the civil rights movement to create a dramatic interpretation of the "lived experiences" and perspectives of the people of RVA. Our focal points for the work explored themes surrounding a) The Commonwealth, b) The Ground on which we stand, and c) Stories in the soil. This collaborative piece includes the stunning videography of David Riley, the grounded beats of Drums No Guns, and a wonderfully rendered landscape of characters and authentic voices from the Greater Richmond community by our incredible ensemble of actors. The gathering of these stories and their adaptation into the script of *COMMON/*

wealth & COMMON/debt was inspired by a methodology called Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum (RPD). Ritual Poetic Drama is grounded in story as practice, and uses, as one of its foundational tenets, this quote from James Baldwin: “A story is impelled by the necessity to reveal itself and therefore a story can have nothing to hide; at least not intentionally. There is no resolution to a story. The aim of the story is revelation in what we make of the questions with which the story leaves us.” The RPD process challenges the eurocentric scriptwriting model of exposition, plot development, rising conflict, climax and resolution. The process engages the community as collaborative partners instead of the singular script writer or playwright. In the RPD process, the story is the centerpiece, and the rite of passage journey is the modality to reveal the story. The revelation serves to enlighten and transform both the artist and the community surrounding the artist. All of the testimonials and lived experiences gathered and shared in the script and in the live performance of *COMMON/wealth & COMMON/debt* were examples of rites of passage moments and the lived experiences of the community participants in RVA.

This synthesis of artistic expression through multidimensional forms of media combined the power of historic images, rhythmic vibrations, drumming, creative movement, social dance, call & response, and spoken word to acknowledge the unhealed history here in the *COMMON/wealth*. The potent mixture of transformative and participatory art utilized for this collaborative piece also incorporated the healing elements of culturally responsive circle process—with social distancing and mask wearing—to provide an intentional space for self-care of the participants, who immersed themselves in the traumagenic waters of collective, historic, and generational harm.

The power of this synthesis of art and social justice arises from acknowledging how the impact of our common past affects the possibilities for our common destiny. By examining, exploring, unpacking, and interrogating the truth and lies surrounding the past/future continuum of unhealed racial and social injustice, acceptance and agreement can emerge. Hopefully, this interrogation empowers advocates, activists, allies, and abolitionists to fully engage in a generative process of open and honest dialogue about racism and oppression throughout the *COMMON/wealth*.

Although the city of Richmond was an epicenter of the slavocracy system in this *COMMON/wealth* and the Americas, it can evolve into a city for truth, racial healing, and transformation. Yet it is imperative for the community to hear and listen to the young people who continue to demonstrate and protest for equity, justice, and liberation. It was their collective cry for freedom that compelled us to research this notion of the commonwealth, remember the ground on which we stand, and respond to the stories in the soil.

Commonwealth is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

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