



**Spencer Museum of Art to Open Exhibition Exploring the Power of Language  
In Black Contemporary Culture**

**Developed in Partnership with History of Black Writing Research Project,  
Exhibition Features Major Works of Art, Reading Room, and Archival Materials**

*Black Writing*

**On View August 19, 2023 – January 7, 2024**

**Lawrence, KS (May 11, 2023)**—On August 19, the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas (KU) will open *Black Writing*, an exhibition exploring the power, politics, and complexities of language in contemporary Black culture. It features new and recent works by Paul Stephen Benjamin, Bethany Collins, Jamal Cyrus, Stephanie Dinkins, Carrie Schneider, and Dread Scott, as well as a new commission by Fahamu Pecou that engages with Octavia Butler’s book *Parable of the Sower*. The exhibition is developed in partnership with the History of Black Writing (HBW), a major ongoing research project on KU’s campus that supports the recovery, preservation, study, and circulation of literature by Black writers. Coinciding with the 40th anniversary of HBW’s founding, the forthcoming exhibition extends the work of the project to embrace visual artists whose practices engage with literature, writing, reading, and the intricacies of words. *Black Writing* captures the dynamic relationship between the visual and literary arts and the ways in which artists leverage language to empower, heal, question, resist, and create moments of meaning and care. The exhibition, which will remain on view through January 7, 2024, is curated by Ayesha Hardison, Director of the History of Black Writing, and Joey Orr, Mellon Curator for Research at the Spencer.

*Black Writing* reflects the Spencer’s commitment to amplifying under-represented voices and to embedding the visual arts within cross-disciplinary research practices to encourage different ways of learning and connecting with the public. To enhance engagement with the work of HBW, the exhibition will feature a reading room that includes a selection of books by author and poet Langston Hughes. Hughes lived in Lawrence, KS, during his youth and his life and career were the subject of a major symposium hosted by HBW in 1999. The reading room offers a new platform through which audiences can connect with his lesser-known work. The space will be activated through the duration of the exhibition with live readings and speaking programs. *Black Writing* will also include documentary media that captures and explores the development of HBW, including commentary from HBW founder Dr. Maryemma Graham. An additional gallery at the Spencer will include works from its collection by artists

whose practices engage with related themes, including Aaron Douglas, Glenn Ligon, Adrian Piper, and Betye Saar.

“HBW is excited to partner with the Spencer Museum of Art to celebrate and share the work of HBW during this milestone year for the project,” said Hardison. “Over the past 40 years, our mission has been to preserve Black writing, to leverage the power of the digital in this effort, and to embrace creative and forward-thinking approaches. With this exhibition, we are bringing Black writing into conversation with visual practice, illuminating the connections between writers and artists and engaging with new audiences.”

“An essential aspect of the Spencer’s mission is to bring visual arts into research practices, by working with contemporary artists who can offer new and differing perspectives and approaches to urgent projects across the sciences and humanities,” said Orr. “HBW’s 40th anniversary is an opportunity to examine the power of language in visual culture and its relationship to the world of writing. In this way, the exhibition brings together educational, research, and community values in the space of the Museum.”

### **Artist Highlights**

*Black Writing* is anchored by a large-scale installation by artist Paul Stephen Benjamin, titled *Black is Beautiful*. The installation, which Benjamin first began developing in 2020, features two monumental, black-painted walls with the phrase “Black is Beautiful” applied in black vinyl across several rows on each wall. The repetition has a meditative quality and invites visitors to consider the meaning of the words—personally and communally—and to embrace their power. The work is part of Benjamin’s ongoing explorations of the color and sound of black as a means of engaging with questions of identity. Benjamin will activate the installation with a performance at the opening of the exhibition and at another moment during the run of the show.

Another major work in the exhibition is Stephanie Dinkins’s *Not The Only One (N’TOO)*, an ongoing experiment that she began developing in 2018. Through the work, Dinkins is creating a multi-generational memoir of a Black family, as told through Artificial Intelligence (AI). The sculptural object presented in the exhibition is a voice-interactive AI entity designed, trained, and aligned with the concerns and ideals of under-represented people. *N’TOO* reflects and is empowered to pursue the goals of its community through deep learning algorithms, creating a new kind of conversant built on small data to avoid biased datasets. With an evolving intellect, *N’TOO* is capable of poetic insights and refusing to speak.

Fahamu Pecou is an interdisciplinary artist who explores and challenges representations of Black men within contemporary culture. His creative work and scholarship expand the expressions and understandings of Blackness. For *Blacking Writing*, Pecou was invited to make new work that responds to Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, which was previously selected by the university as the upcoming year’s [Common Book](#). His large-scale paintings will embrace and interpret passages from the book through the lens of his artistic practice. His installation will also serve as the Spencer’s [Common Work of Art](#), which the museum commissions and/or presents each year in tandem with the Common Book, creating dynamic connections between the visual and literary arts.

### **About the History of Black Writing**

[History of Black Writing \(HBW\)](#) is committed to creating lasting change in the canon of American

literature, by preserving and bringing to the fore the work and legacies of African American and Black writers throughout the diaspora. Guided by a collaborative work model that supports the research of students, writers, and scholars, HBW's work includes initiatives across literary recovery and preservation; digital content building and access; the development of curriculum; and the presentation of public exhibitions and programs. Among its programs is the [Black Literary Suite \(BLS\)](#), which each year introduces audiences to lesser-known figures in literature and the arts. Past BLS presentations have focused on authors with a Kansas connection like Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes and the adaptation of Black fiction to feature length films. In 2022, BLS highlighted Afro-Latinx authors and scholars. As part of its 40th anniversary celebrations, HBW is creating a list of 40 understudied books drawn from its digital archive.

HBW was founded by Dr. Maryemma Graham at the University of Mississippi in 1983 as the Computer Assisted Analysis of Black Literature (CAABL). It would later be renamed the Project on the History of Black Writing (HBW). The Project moved to the University of Kansas in 1998, where it remains and is situated in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in the Department of English. Over its 40-year history, it has been responsible for creating guides on the study of African American literature, presenting a wide range of exhibitions and public engagement events, and for preserving and illuminating the depth and breadth of Black literary works.

### **About the Spencer Museum of Art**

[The Spencer Museum of Art](#), located on the University of Kansas Lawrence campus, explores the intersection of art, ideas, and experiences. With a diverse collection of more than 48,000 works, the Spencer is the only museum in Kansas with contemporary and historic artwork in all mediums from cultures across six continents. The Spencer Museum facilitates arts engagement and research through exhibitions, artist commissions and residencies, conferences, performances, lectures, children's art activities, and arts and culture festivals. Admission to the Spencer Museum of Art is free.

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