

# VERA LIST CENTER FOR ART AND POLITICS

## Freedom of Speech: A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness

### Seminar 5: Seditious Speech

Saturday, April 13, 2019

#### SUMMARY

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##### *Participants*

**Kazembe Balagun**, cultural historian, activist, and writer

**Rob Fields**, President & Executive Director, Weeksville Heritage Center

**Prithi Kanakamedala**, Bronx Community College CUNY

**Michael Rakowitz**, artist

**Dread Scott**, artist

**Nabiha Syed**, General Counsel, *The Markup*

##### *Actors and Performers*

**Zenzelé Cooper**

**Alphonse Fabien**

**Jeremiah Hosea**

**Travis Raeburn**

**Sean C. Turner**

**Nana Kwame Williams**

*A Time for Seditious Speech* began with an introduction by **Kazembe Balagun** and a performance/reading of Henry Highland Garnet's 1843 "Call to Rebellion" speech. Performers were stationed throughout the historic grounds of Weeksville Heritage Center, and the speech resonated powerfully with the history of the site as a home of Black self-determination, alongside contemporary realities. The performers led the audience back into the lecture room for the rest of the seminar.

Kazembe Balagun, a historian and writer, introduced curator and historian **Prithi Kanakamedala**, as well as media and technology lawyer **Nabiha Syed**. Prithi kicked off her history lesson by pointing out that the direct link between Henry Highland Garnet and Weeksville was through his wife, Sara Thompkins Garnet, who was the first Black woman principal. She also asked what it meant to be free within the context of the city and discussed historic Weeksville as the second largest community dedicated to Black self-determination in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She emphasized the importance of self-determination as a way to achieve freedom on one's own terms by asserting 1) a right to exist; 2) a desire to feel safe/find refuge; and 3) the right to joy and self-celebration.

Nabiha picked up the thread of self-determination by explicitly naming the link between individual action and state/community action as it played out historically in the courts. She pointed to historical cases such as whether *The Masses* radical journal "caused" insubordination during WWI; the Eugene Debs decision of 1919; and the Brandenburg decision of 1969 as examples of ways in which the law is politically

contingent on the times in which it was made. She noted that boycott movements today parallel Garnet's exhortations because they bring individuals together in collective action towards change.

Kazembe then discussed the ways in which speech and the joining together in ideas around speech can create community. Prithi discussed the right to take space and the right to be heard as related ideas, and Nabiha noted that the First Amendment protects rights of both speech and association, and that these are nearly always interpreted in relationship to contemporary political realities. The panel then discussed the paradox of the digital realm in relationship to free speech, bringing up many issues addressed in the Personal and Pervasive seminar.

Next, artist **Michael Rakowitz** discussed his film project *I'm Good at Love, I'm Good at Hate, It's in Between I Freeze* (2018), which has been recently excluded from the Leonard Cohen exhibition at the Jewish Museum because the Leonard Cohen Estate might sue him for copyright infringement. Michael explained that he became obsessed with Cohen and even learned classical guitar to play his songs (which he does beautifully in the film) all the while looking deeply at Cohen's history of playing for Israeli troops during the 1973 Yom Kippur war. He then showed a clip of the film, which narrates the artist's obsession with Cohen as well as his attempts to convince Cohen not to play in Tel Aviv in order to play in Ramallah, so as to avoid breaking the call by Palestinian civil society for a boycott of Israel. He spoke of his Arab Jewish heritage as well as his personal links to Cohen and his legacy.

Artist **Dread Scott** then declared a need for seditious speech today, and noted that his 1988 flag work, that was outlawed by Congress, is proof of the power of art. He then described his forthcoming *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* that will take place in November 2019 in New Orleans in depth, describing the recruitment and training of 500 Black people who will wear period costumes and re-enact the largest revolt of enslaved people in the US in 1811. He stressed that he was building his army the way they would have been recruited originally, one by one, by personal interview and word of mouth.

Kazembe then prompted the artists to say more about their work in relationship to free speech. Michael said he was interested in making a work within the boycott and thought that if you can't get someone to understand human rights, perhaps you can get them to understand civil rights. Dread talked about the importance of embodying freedom and emancipation and connecting it to the present, as well as why it is just as important, if not more so, to talk about slave rebellion as it is to talk about slavery. He said that artists produce non-verbal and non-linear space in society, and he and Michael discussed the ways in which silence can also produce powerful impacts. Nabiha then added that the structure of speech today, and the ways in which racist speech was amplified was important to interrupt, noting the wildfire of marginal ideas that are often swept up to the White House.

*The seminar series **Freedom of Speech. A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness** is organized by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics as part of the center's 2018–2020 curatorial focus *If Art Is Politics*. It is directed by Carin Kuoni, Director/Chief Curator, Vera List Center, and Laura Raicovich with assistance by Gabriela López Dena. Partner organizations for the seminars are ARTICLE 19, the National Coalition Against Censorship, New York Peace Institute, and Weeksville Heritage Center. This seminar is copresented in partnership with Weeksville Heritage Center.*

*Further information on each seminar, including SUGGESTED READINGS, PROGRAM, SUMMARY, and VIDEO DOCUMENTATION, at [www.veralistcenter.org](http://www.veralistcenter.org).*