



Cultural Diaspora, 2018. From left to right: Genevieve Jessee, Nai'lah Rowe, Bode Asinyabi, Blessing Hungwe, Kara Lee Corthron, Carlyle Brown, Chuck Mike, Kimberly Ellis, France-Luce Benson, Femi Osofisan (PHOTO: Tom Matthew Wolfe)

Camargo Foundation's *Cultural Diaspora* 2018 Fellows Participate in Afro-Atlantic Playwright Festival (Minneapolis, July 12–14, 2019)

Playwrights from Africa and the U.S. share new works and perspectives

CASSIS, FRANCE — In 2018, eight accomplished black playwrights—four from Africa and four from the U.S.—convened in Cassis, France, for four extraordinary weeks, to participate in the Camargo Foundation's Cultural Diaspora residency, conceived and curated by award-winning Minneapolis-based playwright Carlyle Brown. Realized with generous support from the National Endowment for the Arts, Jerome Foundation, Ford Foundation, and FACE (French American Cultural Exchange), the residency's goal was to bring together mid-career and established African and African-American theater artists, in Brown's words, "from opposite ends of the Africanist Diaspora," engaging them in debates about identity and authenticity and exploring the different ways in which international boundaries shape the African experience.

The eight winners, selected from 72 applications from 25 African nations and dozens of U.S. cities, included: Bode Asinyabi (Benin City, Nigeria), France-Luce Benson (New York City, U.S.), Kara Lee Corthron (New York City, U.S.), Kimberly Ellis (Pittsburgh, U.S.), Blessing Hungwe (Harare, Zimbabwe), Zainabu Jallo (Bern, Switzerland/Nigeria), Genevieve Jessee (San Francisco, U.S.), and Femi Osofisan (Ibadan, Nigeria). The residency was co-directed by acclaimed theater director Chuck Mike, who described the experience as a chance to "explore one's craft, voice, and African-ness in a picturesque and encouraging atmosphere with kindred spirits." As a measure of the residency's success, the Cultural Diaspora has inspired the Afro-Atlantic Playwright Festival (Minneapolis, July 12–14, 2019). A collaboration of the Camargo Foundation, the Playwrights' Center, and Carlyle Brown & Company, the festival will feature workshops, a panel discussion on theater and Afro-

Atlantic culture, and stage readings of the works completed at Camargo by fellows Osofisan, Jallo, and Benson. The festival is made possible with kind support from the Venturous Theater Fund.

The Cultural Diaspora residency and Afro-Atlantic Playwright Festival are timely, given the intensifying debate on race and identity in contemporary culture and politics. Brown, whose work consistently provokes conversations about race, cites as inspiration for these programs the West African *griots*—the storytellers, praise singers, poets who carry on a culture’s oral traditions and serve as repositories of African people’s histories. He notes, “In African-American culture I consider preachers, spoken-word artists, stand-up comics, blues singers, and playwrights as part of that tradition. I have long been fascinated by the mysteries of the transference of those traditions from Africa to the New World, and how they managed to survive through subversion and rebellion, transforming itself into one of the major cultural influences in the world.”

The festival, free and open to the public, will take place at the Playwrights’ Center, renowned for supporting playwrights and promoting new plays to production at theaters across the U.S. While at Camargo, fellows had the opportunity to meet African-European artists, work with local theater students, and participate in a roundtable discussion entitled “African and Afro-Descendent Writing,” which was presented as part of the Festival de Marseille and Massilia Afropea. In Minneapolis, they will discuss the impact of these experiences on their work and debate various conceptual and cultural facets of African diaspora studies. A second event will take place in New York in Fall 2019, in collaboration with NYU’s Department of Literature and Tisch Theatre Studies program.

The Camargo Foundation plans to reprise the Cultural Diaspora program in 2021, expanding the residency to six weeks and broadening the open call to include playwrights of African descent (mid-career or established) from all over the world, not just Africa and the U.S.; all playwrights who identify themselves as part of the diaspora are eligible to apply. The Foundation hopes to establish the Cultural Diaspora as a recurring program, signaling an important new chapter for the Camargo, which has been offering residencies to artists, thinkers, and scholars since 1971. By organizing residencies along thematic lines, the Foundation provides artists with diverse backgrounds, working along shared lines of thought, the chance to exchange of perspectives and opportunities to network and collaborate. Importantly, the Cultural Diaspora offered its participants “a safe haven, free of occidental screening and judgment with no self-explanations and no obligations to represent anyone but oneself,” as residency co-facilitator and theater director Chuck Mike put it. The Camargo Foundation is currently seeking grants and other funding to launch the next Cultural Diaspora residency, which will include follow-up events in the U.S. and Africa in 2021-2022.

PROGRAM OF THE AFRO-ATLANTIC PLAYWRIGHT FESTIVAL

Friday, July 12, 7:00pm - *Deux Femmes On The Edge De La Revolution* by France-Luce Benson
[REGISTER HERE](#)

Saturday, July 13, 1:00pm - *Not All Canoes Sail Back Home: Maya, Maryse, And Efua In Nkrumah's Ghana* by Femi Osofisan [REGISTER HERE](#)

Saturday, July 13, 7:00pm - *We Take Care Of Our Own* by Zainabu Jallo [REGISTER HERE](#)

Sunday, July 14, 1:00pm - Roundtable discussion with Carlyle Brown, Chuck Mike, France-Luce Benson, Zainabu Jallo, and Femi Osofisan [REGISTER HERE](#)

The festival is free and open to the public.

Location: Playwrights' Center, 2301 East Franklin Avenue, Minneapolis, MN 55406, US

ABOUT THE CAMARGO FOUNDATION

Since 1971, the Camargo Foundation has welcomed hundreds of artists, thinkers, and scholars to its stunning campus in Cassis, South of France. The artist residency program grew out of a series of experimental music and theater festivals organized by Camargo Foundation founder Jerome Hill in the 1950s and 1960s, which included commissions from the New York-based Living Theater, French composer Oliver Messiaen, and others. His Cassis estate became a refuge for artists, attracting avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas, actress Brigitte Bardot, and many others. Through international open calls and a rigorous selection process, the Camargo Foundation supports groundbreaking research and experimentation in the arts and humanities. Notable past fellows include theater director Lee Breuer, experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer, composer Fabrizio Cassol, choreographer Wen Hui, and also scholars Ben Kiernan or Alice Kaplan. The Camargo Foundation is a U.S.-registered 501c3 nonprofit and contributions are tax deductible.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHTS' CENTER

Founded in 1971 by five writers seeking artistic and professional support, the Playwrights' Center today serves more playwrights in more ways than any other organization in the U.S. The Center focuses on supporting playwrights and promoting new plays to production, helping to launch the careers of numerous nationally recognized artists, notably August Wilson, Lee Blessing, Suzan-Lori Parks, Jordan Harrison, Carlyle Brown, Craig Lucas, Jeffrey Hatcher, Melanie Marnich, and Kira Obolensky. Works developed through Center programs have been realized on such stages as the Yale Rep, Woolly Mammoth, Guthrie, Goodman, and many others. Its Core Writer Program gives 25–30 of the most exciting playwrights from across the U.S. the time and tools to develop new work for the stage.

ABOUT CARLYLE BROWN & COMPANY

Carlyle Brown & Company was founded by playwright, performer, and theater director Carlyle Brown in 2002 around a constellation of culturally and ethnically diverse artists dedicated to the performance of his work in an atmosphere of collaborative co-creation. The company is interested in innovations in dramatic form, rich storytelling, and shaping ideas into theatrical events. The Company has produced *Are you now or have you ever been...*, *Abe Lincoln and Uncle Tom in the White House*, *Therapy and Resistance*, *Finding Fish*, *Down in Mississippi*, *Talking Masks*, *The Fula From America*, *The Masks of Othello*, and *Acting Black: Demystifying Racism*. The latter is one-man show performed by Brown, styled like a TED talk, created to spark honest conversations about race and diversity. Brown's works have been presented at theaters across the U.S.

For more information, artist portraits, or to schedule interviews, please contact:

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Cultural Diaspora 2018 Participant Biographies

CURATORS

Carlyle Brown is an award-winning performer, theater director, and founder of the Minneapolis-based Carlyle Brown & Company. Described by the *New York Times* as "one of America's more significant playwrights," Brown's multiple honors include the Black Theatre Network's Winona Lee Fletcher Award for Outstanding Achievement and Artistic Excellence (2006), United States Artists (2010), Otto René Castillo Award for Political Theatre (2010), and William Inge Theater Festival Honoree (2018). He is the recipient of grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, McKnight Foundation, Pew Charitable Trust, New York Foundation for the Arts, and Guggenheim. His plays have been commissioned by and performed in theaters across the U.S., and include *Little Tommy Parker Celebrated Colored Minstrel Show*, *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been...*, and *Abe Lincoln and Uncle Tom in the White House*. His most frequently produced play, *The African Company Presents Richard III*, and his solo show *The Fula from America: An African Journey* inspired Brown to develop the Cultural Diaspora creative residency at Camargo. Brown is working on his latest play, *Malcom X and the House on Sugar Hill*, a coming of age story about an African-American boy growing up in the historic Harlem neighborhood between 1959 and 1965, the year of Malcolm's assassination. Brown has taught widely and is a core writer of the Playwright's Center in Minneapolis.

Chuck Mike is an internationally acclaimed playmaker, director, and activist whose works have appeared at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., the Royal Court Theatre in London, the Edinburgh Festival, and the National Theatre in Nigeria. Born in Brooklyn, raised in Nigeria and based in Richmond, VA, Mike's plays include *Sense of Belonging: The Tale of Ikpiko*, which centers on female circumcision in Nigeria, and *ZHE: (noun) undefined*, a story about the intersectionality of culture, nationality, gender, and sexuality. Mike's passion for initiating performances for social change in rural and urban communities has taken him across Africa, Europe, and North America. Mentored by Nigerian writer and Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka, Mike is the founding artistic director for Collective Artistes (Nigeria and UK), and has produced four theater festivals for CAFTAN (Collective Artistes Festival of Theatre Arts Nigeria). His many awards include a Fulbright grant, MacArthur Foundation fellowship, and Ford Foundation grant. He is an associate professor at the University of Richmond in Virginia and co-directed the Camargo Foundation 2018 Cultural Diaspora residency.

CULTURAL DIASPORA FELLOWS FEATURED IN THE AFRO-ATLANTIC FESTIVAL

France-Luce Benson is an award winning playwright of Haitian descent, currently based in Los Angeles and New York. Her plays have had productions and workshops at the Ensemble Studio Theatre, Bishop Arts Theatre, the Fire This Time Festival, City Theatre Miami, Crossroads Theatre, Playwrights Horizons, and the Lark, among others. Honors include: Dramatists Guild Fellowship, Miranda Foundation grant recipient, Zoetrope Grand prize, Alfred P. Sloan commission, Sam French OOB Festival winner, Princess Grace Award (runner up), NNPN Best New Play, and residencies at Djerassi and SPACE/Ryder Farm. About her work, she says, "My plays explore the black American narrative from my perspective as a first generation Haitian-American, born in Republic of Congo, and raised in Miami. My characters often struggle with displacement, identity, and the impacts of trauma." While a resident at Camargo, she worked on part 2 of *Deux Femmes on the Edge of a Revolution*, a trilogy about the Haitian revolution. She intends to complete the trilogy during her residency at the Sacatar Foundation in Brazil later this year.

Zainabu Jallo is a Nigerian-born scholar, playwright, and photographer living between Bern, Switzerland and Brazil. Her academic and creative work has been supported by fellowships at the Sundance Theater Institute, Institute for World Literature, Harvard University, Institute for Cultural Diplomacy in Berlin, Residenz Theater Munich, Chateau Lavigny, and House of Writers in Switzerland. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts England and UNESCO Coalition of Artists for the General History of Africa. She is author of award-winning plays *Onions Make Us Cry*, *Holy Night*,

and *My Sultan is a Rockstar*. Her other plays include *The Revolutionary Carrot*, *White Elephants* and *Saraya Dangana*. She is currently a Doctoral researcher at the Graduate School of Humanities, University of Bern and the Department of Anthropology, University of São Paulo. Her scholarly interests include diaspora studies, iconic criticism, and Material Culture. While at Camargo, she worked on her newest play *We Take Care of our Own* and on *Transnational Nomadism and Cultural Transfer: Drama in Mobility*, a study of the function of dramatic texts in mobility and the political factors responsible for their circulation

Femi Osofisan is an internationally lauded playwright, scholar, poet, novelist, actor, director, songwriter, and activist. Based in Ibadan, Nigeria, he has enjoyed a long career of writing, directing, and teaching in his home country and abroad, including the Guthrie Theatre (1997). His work has been described as “cries for personal freedom and political action.” A member of the Advisory Board of the International Research Centre at Freire Universitat, in Berlin, Osofisan was awarded the prestigious Thalia Prize in 2016, the first African to be so honored by the International Association of Theatre Critics. Under his given name and his pseudonym, Okinba Launko, he has published five novellas, six volumes of poetry, and over 50 plays, including *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *A Nightingale for Dr. Dubois*. Professor Emeritus of Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan, Osofisan spent his time at Camargo working on *The Africa-Diaspora Triad: Three Plays on African-Americans and the Beginnings of African Independence (2): Maya Angelou*. This series was inspired by historic events: In the late 1950s, new African leaders invited progressive African-Americans to come and help in nation-building. Ghana in particular, under the dynamic Kwame Nkrumah, attracted figures such as W. E. B. DuBois and Maya Angelou. Osofisan’s plays imagine the interactions between the Americans and their hosts and their impacts on the African nations’ futures.

CULTURAL DIASPORA FELLOWS

Bode Asiyanni is a two-time winner of the BBC African Performance Playwriting Prize (2005 and 2011) and recipient of the British Council LTF Playwriting Prize (2016 and 2017). His short stories have appeared in *Munyori Literary Journal*, *Kalahari Review*, *Lawino*, *Per Contra*, and *Wasafiri*. His stage plays include *Shattered*, *Room 69*, *The Wait*, and *One Chance!* Based in Benin City, Nigeria, he describes himself as “a restless troubadour from a long line of village weavers and palace bards; spinning colored yarns of errant stories and seeking lost songs to sing out from rooftops.” During his Camargo residency, he worked on *Trauma, Identity, Memory, and the Journey to Black Nationhood*, an exploration of how traditional African storytelling tools have the power to help redefine black identity.

Kara Lee Corthron is a playwright, author, and TV writer based in Los Angeles. Her plays include *Alice Grace Anon* (New Georges Theatre Company, New York); *Holly Down in Heaven* (Forum Theatre, Washington, D.C.); *Listen for the Light* (Know Theatre of Cincinnati); and *Welcome to Fear City* (CATF, Shepherdstown, WV, and Kansas City Rep). She is the author of the young-adult novel *The Truth of Right Now* (Simon & Schuster) and currently writes for the Netflix show *YOU*. Her awards include the 2019 Otis Guernsey New Voices in Playwriting Award, the Parents’ Choice Gold Award, Vineyard Theatre’s Paula Vogel Award, Princess Grace Award, Helen Merrill Award and residencies at MacDowell (U.S.), the Bogliasco Foundation (Italy), Skriðuklaustur (Iceland), and Hawthornden (Scotland). She is a proud member of New Dramatists. During her Camargo residency, she worked on *What Are You Worth?* (formerly *The Value Project*), an artistic investigation of human value inspired by the fact that 21 million people are enslaved around the world today.

Kimberly C. Ellis, Ph.D. (Pittsburgh) is a playwright, performing artist, activist, and independent scholar. Popularly known as “Dr. Goddess,” she toured “*Dr. Goddess!: A One Woman Show*” throughout the United States, won first place in the Embodi Playwrights Festival in Los Angeles and performed excerpts in places such as the New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts and the “Women as Global Leaders Conference” in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The ensemble sequel, “*Dr. Goddess Goes to Jail, a spoken word, musical comedy unfortunately based on a true story*,” was commissioned and debuted for the Pittsburgh Three Rivers Arts Festival and was named one of the Top 10 Theatre Productions in 2007 (now available on DVD). A Scholar of American and Africana Studies, Dr. Ellis is the author of the upcoming book, *The Bombastic Brilliance of Black Twitter*, and creator

of #ATripOffTheOldBlock, a chronicle of her world travels. She is also the producer of *You're Beautiful to Me*, an upcoming, feature documentary film chronicling her mother's journey with dementia. Dr. Goddess has been an artist-in-residence at the Renaissance House in Martha's Vineyard, the Virginia Center for the Arts and the Banff Artists Center for Arts and Creativity. In Cassis, Ellis worked on her latest musical entitled, *AfroRoma, a love story* and a scholarly memoir tracing Black Madonnas, Game of Thrones locations and the African Diaspora throughout Europe. She lives online at @drgoddess.

Blessing Hungwe has worked extensively in the theatre, film, and television industries. Based in Harare, he is the winner of National Arts Merit Awards for Outstanding Theatrical Productions in Zimbabwe. With a background in journalism, Hungwe is currently pursuing a masters degree in media and social studies, His Camargo project was *Dogs and Pigs: An African Journey to Sexual Freedom*, a theatrical project focused on LGBTQI rights and issues in the context of a nation that denounces LGBTQI individuals as "un-African," and "worse than dogs and pigs."

Genevieve Jessee is an actor and playwright jointly based in the San Francisco Bay Area and Puerto Rico whose work has been staged at PlayGround's Center for New Works, the Source Festival, Solo Sundays, Atlanta Black Theatre Festival, San Francisco Fringe Festival, EXIT theatre, and Those Women Productions. Her awards include the June Anne Baker Prize, Best of the San Francisco Fringe, and PlayGround's Emerging Playwright Award. Her Camargo project, *The Diaspora Cycle*, explores the African American experience through ten interconnected 10 minute plays that form a full-length work following the bloodline of one woman across generations and continents. The Diaspora Cycle was a semi-finalist for the 2019 O'Neill National Playwrights Conference and a finalist for the Bay Area Playwright's Festival.