



****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****

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XAVIER UNIVERSITY’S WOMEN’S STUDIES PROGRAM, PERFORMANCE STUDIES LABORATORY and DEPARTMENT OF ART & PERFORMANCE STUDIES PRESENTS “IMAGINING GRACE”

A Performance-oriented Installation of Wellness and Contemplation Inspired by the work of St. Katharine Drexel and the words of Toni Morrison in recognition of Women’s History Month

New Orleans, LA (March 7, 2022)—Beginning Tuesday, March 8, International Women’s Day, three programs at Xavier University will present *Imagining Grace*, a performance-oriented installation encouraging visitors’ participation in activities promoting wellness and contemplation. Located in the Administration Building Art Gallery on the Xavier University campus, the installation entails curated spaces that actively stimulate the physical senses and foster conscious engagement of the materials in each area. *Imagining Grace* will be available to the public through April 8, 2022. The collaborating programs are Women’s Studies, Performance Studies Laboratory (PSL), and Department of Art & Performance Studies.

Inspired by the legacy of St. Katharine Drexel who committed herself to a life-long mission of educating Black and Indigenous communities by providing institutions—spaces—where they could develop in mind and spirit, and by the works of the late Nobel Prize laureate Toni Morrison whose literary career contributed to how people might understand the black experience in America. Combined, the work of both women considered how the social constructs of race and gender were often employed to limit African Americans’ potential, opportunities, and sought to challenge their wellness. St. Katharine Drexel and Toni Morrison, respectively, were able to peer through the veil of our collective humanity to glimpse the sacred in all her forms and the possibilities for communal wholeness.

Imagining Grace takes as its beginning reference points the works of these women, and reimagines space, opportunity, and wellness for our current times. Working from a passage in Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), the haunting meditation on slavery and its effects on the black body and psyche, *Imagining Grace* is a performance-based installation conjoining Performance Studies, Visual Art, sound, textures, sensory experiences, and contemplative practices seeking to

honor presence, wellness, and the human spirit. Consciously set within the midst of campus life and foot traffic, the project juxtaposes public/private selves, stillness/movement, release/reclaim and ideally becoming “so much more”—one’s “own best thing.”

In *Beloved*, Morrison so poignantly writes: “...[T]he only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (Morrison, *Beloved*).

Responding to events in recent years, *Imagining Grace* asks Xavierites and community members to consider how have we as individuals and society-at-large navigated COVID-19, racialized violence directed towards black bodies, the January 6th assault on the Capitol, the devastation of Hurricane Ida and its coinciding with the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and the breached levees, and threats to campus safety strategically targeting Xavier University and other institutions of higher learning within the HBCU network. Prolonged social distancing, mask requirements, extended reliance on computers for work and socializing set against the human need for interaction, the intimate aspects of personal life—how do/did we come through these moments?

Members of the Xavier community and visitors will have opportunities to walk hand-drawn labyrinths expressly created for the project by Visual Arts faculty, Professors MaPó Kinnard and Ron Bechet, utilize a space organized for meditation including use of singing bowls and a provided list of online sources drawn from myriad musical expressions to create personalized sound baths, and situated Zen-sand gardens for continuously creating ephemeral designs. In other gallery areas, there will be weekly posted prompts supporting self-reflexive exercises for persons to consider the trajectory of their individual pasts, their present, and their imagined future-selves. With each prompt, guests will be invited to join their reflections with those of others, creating ongoing visual texts reflecting both their individuality and their collective humanity. A different written reflection card will be available each week so that visitors can continuously connect to the project beyond the physical space of the gallery.

Every Monday CAT+FD will host a meditation session at 12:30PM in the space led by Bart Everson, and the project will periodically host special events and presentations over the four-week period. The first series of events will be African Dance classes led by Kai Knight, Founder and Creative Director of Seasons Center. Classes are being scheduled for Tuesdays, 5:00PM-6:00PM in the Gallery, March 15th through April 5th. Space is limited, participants will need to register in advance.

For additional information, contact Dr. Robin G. Vander at rvander@xula.edu.

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Performance Studies is often referred to as an embodied way of knowing, a creative approach to scholarship that allows us to make sense of ourselves and others. The Xavier University of Louisiana Performance Studies Laboratory studies performance in contexts such as literature, cultural ritual and rites of passage, identity construction, civic engagement and political actions, and visual and material culture, among others.