

A Momentous Commemoration
Black Writers Awarded 2020 Pulitzer Prizes

Dr. Brenda M. Greene

*"There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear.
We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal."*

Toni Morrison

The Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers College of the City University on New York congratulates Pulitzer Prize winning authors, Jericho Brown for poetry, *The Tradition*, Colson Whitehead for fiction, *The Nickel Boys*, Nikole Hannah-Jones for commentary, the *New York Times* "1619 Project", Michael R. Jackson for drama, *A Strange Loop*, Richard Wesley for a libretto, *The Central Park Five* by Anthony Davis, and Ida B. Wells, for the "Posthumous Pulitzer Prize for Lynching Investigations".

Toni Morrison's words, "We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal." reflect a central thread in the work of the writers who have been awarded 2020 Pulitzer Prizes in poetry, fiction, commentary, drama and music. Each of these writers, from their respective genre, provide varying perspectives and a counter narrative of the experiences of Blacks in America. They address issues of racial, social and historical inequity and in uncovering and examining these inequities offer ways for a healing process. The power of their words in poetry, fiction, drama and music, in effect, is a catalyst for taking action, moving forward, and engaging in the process of healing. In reading, reviewing and acknowledging their contributions in letters, I am reminded of the late John Oliver Killens' adage that writers have a social responsibility. These writers, through their work, have uncovered assumptions, exposed injustices and examined the complexity of the Black experience from the lens of identity, gender and race. Their writing underscores that in documenting the personal and collective stories of Blacks in America, they are exhibiting the role that they play in embracing the social responsibility of the writer.

The Pulitzer Prizes, first held in 1917, are among the nation's most distinguished awards in journalism, letters, and music and have garnered world-wide attention on the achievements of writers in these categories. Colson Whitehead, who won his first Pulitzer in 2017 for his novel *The Underground Railroad* is the fourth writer ever to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction twice. Whitehead's 2020 Pulitzer Prize, *The Nickel Boys*, provides an historical rendering of boys, who convicted of minor offenses, were tortured, abused and buried in unmarked graves at the Dozier School for Boys, located in the Florida panhandle. The poet Jericho Brown uses a combination of poetic forms, the duplex—a combination of the sonnet, the ghazal, and the blues, to explore fatherhood, legacy, blackness, queerness, worship and trauma in his prize-winning poetry collection *The Tradition*. Nikole Hannah-Jones' Commentary Prize for the "1619 Project" provides an in-depth and counter-narrative to the legacy of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans to this country. Michael R. Jackson is the first Black writer to win the Pulitzer in the drama category for his musical, *A Strange Loop*. The musical drama

recounts the story of a young, gay, Black musical theater writer who explores issues of identity, race and sexuality. American playwright and screenwriter Richard Wesley wrote the libretto for Anthony Davis's Pulitzer's jazz-infused opera, "The Central Park Five," the story of the Black teenagers wrongfully convicted of the 1989 assault of a white woman. Civil rights icon and investigative journalist Ida B. Wells received a special citation, long overdue, for her anti-lynching campaign, a comprehensive and outstanding reporting on lynchings in the 1890s.

We applaud our Pulitzer Prize winning Black writers for expanding the Western literary and historical canon in a society constructed by race, albeit, in complex ways. They, in the words of Toni Morrison, are speaking, writing and doing language as they create and broaden narratives that reflect the multilayered and complicated experiences of Blacks in America.

Dr. Brenda M. Greene is Founder and Executive Director of the Center for Black Literature, Professor of English, and Director of the National Black Writers Conference at Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York.