



James Haywood Rolling, Jr.



Kendall R. Phillips

## "Social Justice, Equity, and Inclusion" with the Lender Center at Syracuse University

by Cynthia Mwenja, PhD

Kendall R. Phillips and James Haywood Rolling, Jr, current co-directors of the Lender Center for Social Justice at Syracuse University, guide the Center's work via its three key principles, stated on the Center's website as pursuing "proactive, innovative, and interdisciplinary approaches in issues related to social justice, equity, and inclusion."

The two hold other titles, as well; Rolling is Dual Professor of Art Education and Teaching and Leadership; he also serves as chair of the Arts Education programs at Syracuse and is President of the National Art Education Association (NAEA); Phillips is Professor of Communication and Rhetorical Studies in Syracuse's College of Visual and Performing Arts, where he previously served as department chair and associate dean. Both co-directors draw on their particular skills and disciplinary approaches in guiding the Center's work.

### Development

As Phillips reports, the vision for the Lender Center was developed through a multi-year series of conversations in which a core group of professors worked with founders Marvin and Helaine Lender to develop a social justice initiative specific to Syracuse University. Phillips says that Syracuse is a great place for the Center to be because the city is "large enough to have problems but small enough that the Center can engage" in piloting innovative projects in collaboration with local stakeholders.

After considering a variety of existing models and carefully exploring potential directions that the Center could take, the founding co-directors decided to structure the organization to support interdisciplinary teams of faculty and student Fellows to tackle local issues of inequity in innovative ways. Each year, the co-directors and advisory board choose a faculty Fellow to build on a project that the faculty member has already been involved with in some capacity. After the Center opened in 2019, it has consistently received "a substantial number of outstanding applications" for both faculty and student Fellowship positions, Phillips says. Through the Fellowship, the Lender Center helps faculty Fellows to build upon community-engaged research inquiries they have already begun; the Center adds to their work by offering material support and assembling an interdisciplinary team of student Fellows who enhance and reinforce the project. Faculty and student Fellows work together for two-year terms, culminating in a symposium in which they share their projects and results.



## Interdisciplinary

According to Phillips, who was part of the group who planned the Center, interdisciplinarity is a core value at Syracuse, so this principle formed a natural element of the plan. As part of this commitment to being truly interdisciplinary, one of the co-directors will always be from the School of Education—where the Center is housed—while the other must always be from another school in the university. As a professor in two colleges, Rolling's expertise adds to interdisciplinary nature of the Lender Center's work.

While all Lender Center projects are interdisciplinary, the one led by Seyeon Lee, assistant professor and George Miller Quasi Endowed Professor in the School of Design, offers a case in point. As an architect, she had previously designed a community women's center. Her Lender Center project, which connects questions of design to social, political, justice, access, and equity issues, asks how the community women's center can be used as a hub connecting various parts of the community.

As Lee states in the project's press release, "There is a ton of community space that is underutilized, a lot of pockets of opportunities that are lost, and that's where I would look to engage with the students with their different perspectives and backgrounds." Phillips says the team working with Lee has explored how people from a variety of backgrounds—and with different cultural expectations—access wellness services of all kinds.

## Proactive

Phillips says that the planning group valued proactivity as a principle, but they had a tough time "getting their heads around" how it could drive the Center's work. While Phillips was invited to be part of the group developing the Center because his research deals with the concept of public memory—"whose story gets told and what happens after conflict," as he says—the planning group wanted to create a proactive entity that did more than provide a space for people to react after injustices had already occurred.

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One Lender Center project highlighting such proactive work is a local food justice initiative proposed by Evan Weissman, associate professor of food studies and nutrition in the Falk College. After he unexpectedly passed away, “the Lender Center chose Jonnell Robinson to carry on the fellowship in Weissman’s name,” as the website states. This project, exploring Food Justice within the Syracuse-Onondaga Food Systems Alliance, “examined if the food systems in Syracuse were meeting the needs of the community, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.” Robinson, who was already engaged in community collaborations “to better understand and address social and economic disparities,” is leading a team of students in partnership with the Syracuse Onondaga Food Systems Alliance, a newly created food policy council to “conduct participatory action research to promote community-driven food policies and practices, while studying the strengths and weaknesses of the local food system.” They hope “to

provide a model for how local food policy councils can address structural inequalities in food systems.” Phillips says that this project, showing the relationship between location, food, and people—immigrant, refugee, and native—demonstrates how food systems are justice issues and how food can be seen from a social justice perspective.

Rolling has always aligned with this value of proactivity; in his work as an arts educator, or “creativity educator,” as he says, he wants to help young people see their agency as creative beings—as people who can make change. Rolling promotes the idea that “To make change, people must see themselves as changemakers.” He is justifiably proud of the work he has inspired at the NAEA as it makes “real strides” toward becoming an anti-racist organization; these changes, he notes, are intended not only to affect the professional field, but also to foster the development of diverse learners who must be offered the same access as anyone else to enter the arts and design professions; his goal is aligned with the

mission of NAEA to more fully shape human potential through creative agency.

### Innovative

Phillips says that “a spirit of innovation” is not necessarily the norm for social justice work, but the group wanted to find ways to address old problems in new ways. They also wanted to create a model that was different from existing social justice centers, many of which focus on one or two specific social justice issues or view issues through a single lens. The planning group decided to provide space for working on a multiplicity of social justice concerns rather than privileging any particular one.

The inaugural Lender Center project exemplifies such innovation. The first Lender Center Fellow, Casarae Gibson-Abdul-Ghani, assistant professor of African American Literature and Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences, led a digital humanities project “aimed at utilizing social media platforms as a way of uncovering social justice trends.” As she stated when the project began, “The



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ways in which we teach our students in the Information Age about social justice and how they must be equipped to challenge messages of inequality is vital.” This inquiry, connecting digital humanities work to issues of social justice, set the innovative tone for all subsequent Lender Center projects.

Rolling brings experience innovating from the NAEA, where he served as architect and inaugural chair of the organization’s new Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Commission. His open letter to arts educators on constructing an anti-racist agenda, written following George Floyd’s murder, had a ripple

effect within the organization and to other arts fields, influencing the NAEA and others to fully embrace an anti-racist agenda. As the son of a practicing artist, Rolling’s path to working with issues of equity is longstanding—knowing firsthand how hard it was and is for people to get into the field has driven him to help more people become contributors; these experiences attract him to the work of the Lender Center. His commitment to innovation stems from his lived experiences; as he says, “this work is personal to me, not just professional.”

### Lender Center Conversations

The initiatives that are being driven by the Fellows examine big issues proactively, asking questions such as “How should food justice look?” and “How should health and wellness justice look?” The co-directors, however, realized that the Center couldn’t ignore ongoing injustices; it “doesn’t exist in a vacuum,” as Phillips says. To be more responsive to current events, they developed “The Lender Conversations,” which are events headed by one of the co-directors. Since each co-director brings “something different to the table, each co-director organizes a Conversation” Rolling says.

The first of these conversations was a symposium at the National Press Club called “Difficult Conversations,” which is viewable as “Addressing ‘Difficult’ Aspects of U.S. History” on CSPAN. Phillips says that scholars and practitioners who focus on a wide array of injustices—including the Holocaust and lynching to experiences of native peoples and disabled individuals, among others—came together to have a conversation about how American society should deal with these memories of injustice. Phillips reports “powerful cross-talk moments, such as when a rap artist was discussing intersectionality with a disability rights activist.”

The second Lender Center Conversation, “Policed Bodies: A Community Conversation on Race, Disability, and Justice,” was a symposium that drew experts and activists together to examine “race, disability, and justice in the policing of bodies in communities and schools,” as the website states. Phillips says that almost nine hundred people logged in to take part in the day-and-a-half symposium, and participants were keenly aware of the impact policing can have at the “very local” level. The Syracuse University News article covering the event quotes Marcelle Haddix, founding co-director of the Center: “Conversations about race, disability and justice in the policing of communities and schools are happening across

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Rolling says, “Change-makers are not just creative in their own work, they make change in terms of society, as well.” Rolling knows that artists signify that “their identities, their experiences, their culture, their family are all of worth, of value” when they share their creations that have been made through the lens of personal experience.

the country. Consistent with the Lender Center’s mission, the intention is to create a space where national experts, community activists and local stakeholders have the opportunity for critical dialogue on citizen-led reform of policing and public safety.”

The next Lender Center Conversation, happening this month, “Creative Activity as a Human Right,” is being led by Rolling, who is the Center’s newest co-director. As Rolling says, “Change-makers are not just creative in their own work, they make change in terms of society, as well.” Rolling knows that artists signify that “their identities, their experiences, their culture, their family are all of worth, of value” when they share their creations that have been made through the lens of personal experience. For these reasons, Rolling says, artists are “excellent traffickers in the realm of social justice.” For him, art is “an act of identity—ethnic, personal, cultural, national identity.” These concerns, he notes, are “not narrow; in the full array of what artists have done, we portray human experience.” To fulfill the demands of social justice, then, everyone’s experience must be represented in art so that we can share the “full human story.” The November 11th

virtual event will “expand notions of how we view art,” making the point that “art is much broader than many people understand in terms of what it’s intended to do in the world,” says Rolling. The event will feature “interdisciplinary artists, activists and educators with expertise in the arts, humanities and social sciences joining together to examine what it might mean to rethink creativity as a universal and inalienable human right, a remedy for complicated histories of inhumanity and carelessness, and a change-making, emancipatory form of social intelligence.” The event is free to attend, and registration is required at this link <https://lendercenter.syr.edu/programs-events/>.

In balancing faculty-centered, proactive Fellowship projects with Lender Center Conversations that are responsive to serious social justice issues as they gain public attention in the wake of current events, the Lender Center is sustaining the innovative, proactive, and interdisciplinary model the planners envisioned.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Cynthia Mwenja teaches Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Montevallo.

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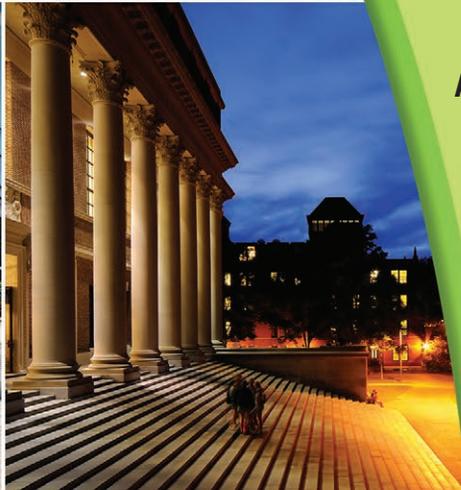
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