

Guild Hall

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THE FIRST LITERATURE PROJECT TO OPEN AT GUILD HALL ON MAY 18 AND RUN THROUGH JULY 15, 2024

The first VR Media produced in the Shinnecock Language has been developed over a 2-year period by Guild Hall Community Artists-in-Residence

Wunetu Wequai Tarrant and Christian Scheider.



April 1, 2024 — East Hampton, NY: Guild Hall (158 Main Street, East Hampton, NY) announced today the final phase of the ***First Literature Project***, developed over a 2-year period by Guild Hall Community Artists-in-Residence Wunetu Wequai Tarrant and Christian Scheider. The *First Literature Project* will be presented in Guild Hall’s Marks Family Gallery South from May 18 through July 15, 2024, featuring the first VR media produced in the Shinnecock Language.

First Literature Project (FLP) proposes to support Native nations in their efforts to maintain and further their languages, narratives, and oral traditions, making them available to both their tribal communities and surrounding areas. By utilizing FLP’s new immersive storytelling platform in

Virtual Reality (VR), advanced 3D technology is repurposed to recreate an important tradition—sitting face-to-face with a storyteller.

“The significance of having a platform to share our history cannot be understated,” says Wunetu Wequai Tarrant. “A wealth of knowledge is left out when the only accounts of Indigenous cultures available are written by outside anthropologists and authors. The FLP's method will bring our stories into the 21st century, using our voices, our faces, and sharing our perspectives.”

The exhibition will utilize the newly released Apple Vision Pro headset to present the story *Padawe*, originally written in English by Elizabeth Chee Chee Thunderbird Haile, now newly translated and narrated in the Shinnecock language by Wunetu Wequai Tarrant, Chee Chee Haile's granddaughter. The exhibition will also feature video works by members of the Shinnecock language revitalization collective Ayim Kutoowonk, Kaysha Haile, Ahanu Valdez, and Cholena Smith-Boyd, and interviews with members of the Shinnecock Nation through a collaboration with The Padoquohan Medicine Lodge.

First Literature Project has been the recipient of several prestigious grants, which has enabled Tarrant & Scheider to fully realize their ideas as part of Guild Hall's Community Artist-in-Residence program.

In 2022, the project received the Creatives Rebuild New York Artist Employment Grant (CRNY AEP). As 1 of 98 projects awarded, the CRNY AEP grant provided full-employment to Tarrant and Scheider, and through additional project support, forged a partnership between Guild Hall and the Padoquohan Medicine Lodge. This partnership resulted in two years of filmed interviews with several members of the Shinnecock Nation including Denise Silva-Dennis, Rebecca Genia, Keith Phillips, Andrina Wekontash Smith, Christina Tarrant, Holly Haile Thompson, Margo Thunderbird, and Ruben Valdez. Their video interviews will be featured as part of the exhibition.

“This was a long process that had to move at the speed of trust. To begin, we were invited into homes, into gathering places, into backyards, and when we arrived all we did was turn the cameras on and listen,” says Christian Scheider. “In close to 100 hours of footage, we asked only a handful of questions. That is always the sign when you know you are where you need to be. There was so much that needed to be said - there still is. Our role, even more than creating this new format, is to listen, and to remember what we hear.”

The project received additional funding in 2023 from the Long Island Community Foundation to review the interviews with an eye toward inviting several interviewees to re-record their orations in the project's new 3D video format for VR.

“We have this saying at Guild Hall – ‘Let Artists Lead The Way,’” says Anthony Madonna, Guild Hall's Patti Kenner Director of Learning + New Works. “The CRNY AEP grant allowed Guild Hall to fully embrace this edict. The opportunity that the CRNY AEP grant not only gifted Wunetu & Christian the headspace to fully immerse themselves in their creative process, but the immense support gave Guild Hall the ability to attract additional funding – allowing the First Literature Project to be fully produced from ideation to exhibition. The CRNY AEP grant is a prime example of longitudinal support for artists and community-based work – a practice shared by Guild Hall.”

In 2023, the project received funding from the Library of Congress' Connecting Communities Digital Initiative (CCDI) award, which is part of the Library's *Of the People: Widening the Path* initiative. The award allowed Tarrant to form the language revitalization collective, Ayim Kutoowonk. Working alongside Tarrant, and guest lecturers, Christina Tarrant, Conor

McDonough Quinn, and Kaylene Big Knife, Ayim Kutoowonk members have created their own multi-media projects and learning tools in the Shinnecock language. The projects have been developed through the study of various primary source documents, including the “Eliot Indian Bible,” held in the Rare Book & Special Collections Division at the Library of Congress. Published between 1660-1663 the “Eliot Indian Bible” was the first complete Bible printed in America, and is translated from English to the Niatock dialect of the North East Algonquin Tribes. The Bible holds significance for the Shinnecock language. Shinnecock ancestor, Caconoe D’Long Island was a primary contributor for The Book Of Genesis, and is currently the only document in Shinnecock within the collection of the Library of Congress.

As part of the CCDI award, the work of Ayim Kutoowonk will be submitted to the Library of Congress for consideration as part of the Library’s digital collection – making it the only primary source in the Shinnecock language that is by, for, and about Shinnecock people.

“Language holds meaning when it is truly understood,” says Ahanu Valdez, member of Ayim Kutoowonk. “By connecting the pieces gathered, We, Ayim Kutoowonk, are regenerating the Shinnecock language. These videos were crafted with the intention of teaching Shinnecock Tribal members our language. Each word spoken and every verse recited serves as a bridge linking the past to the present, ensuring that the understanding within our shared cultural identity is celebrated.”

In 2024, the project received \$70,419.00 in grant funding from The Robert David Lion Gardiner Foundation to present the work of First Literature Project as an exhibition at Guild Hall. The Robert David Lion Gardiner Foundation grant specifically supports the equipment purchase and technical development of the VR Work through a collaboration between Christian Scheider and Khora, a leading Scandinavian Virtual & Augmented Reality production studio, and their co-founder, Peter Fisher.

The exhibition will be open from May 18 – July 15 in Guild Hall’s Marks Family Gallery South, with additional public programs featuring the project’s creative team & collaborations.

- Thursday, May 23, 6pm: Artis Talk with Peter Fisher, Chistian Scheider, & Wunetu Wequai Tarrant
- Thursday, May 30, 6pm: Artist Talk with Ayim Kutoowonk, Andrina Wekontash Smith, & Wunetu Wequai Tarrant.
- Monday, June 17, 6pm: Creative Lab with Ahanu Valdez

To learn more & register for the public programs, please visit guildhall.org

Admission is free, and timed entry is required to experience *First Literature Project’s* virtual-reality work. Patrons who wear glasses or corrective lenses are strongly encouraged to wear contact lenses. Limited space is available every half hour from 12-4 PM, Friday to Monday. Advance reservations are recommended to ensure time slots but are not required.

Pictured: Wunetu Wequai Tarrant. Photo by Christian Scheider.

About Wunetu Wequai Tarrant

Wunetu Wequai Tarrant is a member of the Shinnecock Indian Nation, located on the East End of Long Island, NY. She grew up with her family on the Shinnecock reservation peninsula. Wunetu has been inspired by her grandmother and matriarch of the ThunderBird clan, Elizabeth ‘Chee Chee’ ThunderBird Haile, to promote cultural preservation and education. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Alfred University in 2011, a Masters of Native American Linguistics and Languages from the University of Arizona 2020 and is currently a

Linguistics Ph.D. candidate at the University of Arizona focusing on the reconstruction and revitalization of the Shinnecock dialect of Southern New England Algonquian.

Wunetu has worked closely with the Algonquian Language Revitalization Project on designing curriculum and activities for teaching Shinnecock and related dialects and continues to research best practices in language research and production of materials that will be accessible to community members and teachers regardless of linguistic education experience. She has continued to advocate for Indigenous students as the Julia & Bernard Bloch fellow (2019-2022) and special interest groups through the Linguistic Society of America.

About Christian Scheider

Christian Scheider is an independent filmmaker and theatermaker living between New York City and the East End of Long Island. In addition to his original film and theater work, Scheider heads video production for The Sunny Center in Ireland, the world's only post-exoneration residential community, and produces films for the Bard Prison Initiative, his alma mater. As a theatermaker, Scheider co-adapted, produced, and directed Ray Bradbury's short story, *The Murderer*, and Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *Galápagos* into fully staged productions, and premiered with his collaborators an original slapstick comedy, *The Summit*.

For film, Scheider has produced and directed the documentary *The Sunny Center* about death row exonerees, and co-produced and directed the documentary *The Tree Prophet* about a self-identified climate prophet, which won the Audience Award at the San Francisco Independent Film Festival. Scheider is in perpetual pre-production on the quixotic feature comedy film *Animal Party* about human-animal rituals all over the world, the original screenplay for which was honored by the Redford Center as part of their 2016 grants program. Scheider is currently writing and producing a limited series, *Pullman*, about the eponymous railroad baron and the epochal national labor uprising of 1894.

About Padoquohan Medicine Lodge

The Padoquohan Medicine Lodge, Inc., a 501(c)3 organization, founded in 1994 has worked to honor our ancestors. They lived productive lives on Long Island for well over 25,000 years - sharing land, sea and natural resources - standing in mutual support of each other and their fellow indigenous people. Chief Thunder Bird and Edith Thunder Bird (Shinnecock) are the inspiration of this prayer circle known as Padoquohan Medicine Lodge, Inc. Their teachings, beliefs and examples continue to live on.

PML has been working tirelessly throughout the last 2 decades to support fellow tribe members who struggle with food insecurity and lack of housing. In addition to case-by-case assistance, PML has been on the front lines of countless fights to protect our ancestral lands and ancient burial grounds. PML Chief, Rebecca Hill-Genia, also serves on the Shinnecock Graves Protection Warrior Society and has aided in the repatriation of many of our ancestor's remains.

About Ayim Kutoowonk (She Speaks)

Ayim Kutoowonk (She Speaks) is a collective of three Indigenous Shinnecock Women, Cholena Boyd-Smith, Kaysha Haile, and Ahanu Valdez, working towards the reclamation and revitalization of the Shinnecock Language. Facilitated by Shinnecock Linguist, Wunetu Wequai Tarrant, and guest lecturers, Christina Tarrant, Conor McDonough Quinn, and Kaylene Big Knife, Ayim Kutoowonk works to bridge the divide between academic linguistics training and contemporary Indigenous culture, easing anxieties and building a language-learner focused pedagogy through multi-media projects and learning tools.

The collective was founded in Spring 2023 as part of Guild Hall's Community Artist-in-Resident program, sponsored by the Library of Congress's Connecting Communities Digital Initiative, part of the Library's Mellon-funded program *Of the People: Widening the Path*.

About Khora

Khora is a leading Scandinavian Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) productions studio, creating cutting edge content with multiple application areas.

Khora consists of 30+ full time employees, and over the last seven years has produced more than 400 VR/AR application and hosted more than 2000 workshops and events. Khora explores the value potential of VR and AR through meaningful collaborations and partnerships. They work within multiple industries, with a deep understanding of the technologies and of how and why business and institutions should work within these emerging mediums.

The exhibition First Literature Project is supported by The Robert David Lion Gardiner Foundation.

Guild Hall's Community Artist-in-Residence Program and collaboration with Wunetu Wequai Tarrant, Christian Scheider, and the Padoquohan Medicine Lodge was made possible through support from CRNY's Artist Employment Program. Creatives Rebuild New York (CRNY), a project of the Tides Center, is a three-year, \$125 million investment in the financial stability of New York State artists and the organizations that employ them.

Additional project support was provided by the Long Island Community Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature, and an anonymous donor.

*The formation of Ayim Kutoowonk was made possible through the Library of Congress's Connecting Communities Digital Initiative, part of the Library's Mellon-funded program *Of the People: Widening the Path*. The program provides funds to projects that offer creative approaches to the Library's digital collections and center Black, Indigenous, Hispanic or Latino, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and other communities of color.*

First Literature Project's VR installation was developed by Khora, a leading Scandinavian virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) production studio, creating cutting-edge content within multiple application areas.

Guild Hall's Learning + New Works programs are made possible through The Patti Kenner Arts Education Fellowship, Vital Projects Fund, the Glickberg/Abrahams S.

Kutler Foundation, Stephanie Joyce and Jim Vos, the Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Endowment Fund, and The Melville Straus Family Endowment.

Museum programs are supported by Crozier Fine Arts and funding from The Michael Lynne Museum Endowment and The Melville Straus Family Endowment.

Free gallery admission is sponsored, in part, by Landscape Details.

ABOUT GUILD HALL

Guild Hall is the cultural heart of the East End: a museum, performing arts, and education center, founded in 1931. We invite everyone to experience the endless possibilities of the arts: to open minds to what art can be; inspire creativity and conversation; and have fun.

Guild Hall has served four generations and introduced audiences to the most storied artists and performers of our time. As we approach our centennial, we have embarked on a state-of-the-art renovation to match the caliber of our artistry for twenty-first-century audiences. The facility-wide Capital Improvements Project & Campaign includes top-of-the-line physical and technological enhancements to better deliver on our mission as an artist-driven, interdisciplinary institution.

For more information about Guild Hall, please visit GuildHall.org.

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