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KU scholars strive to advance racial equity through newly funded research projects



"Sophie-Ntombikayise," by Mary Sibande, 2009, Spencer Museum of Art. This piece will be part of a major exhibition of artworks by Black, Indigenous and other women+ of color in spring 2025 at the Spencer Museum, organized by curator Susan Earle.

LAWRENCE – Promoting health equity through a racially inclusive eating disorder screening tool for pregnant and postpartum individuals, deracializing notions of settlement related to houseless encampment, launching a sustainable community archive commemorating a local labor movement fighting for poor workers and workers of color, and celebrating the profound roles of women+ of color as artists and change-makers are among the goals of four projects selected for the 2023 KU Racial Equity Research, Scholarship & Creative Activity Awards.

Led by members of the University of Kansas research and creative community, the two-year projects aim to foster progress toward a state where race no longer determines one's ability to thrive because systemic barriers to quality housing, education, employment, health care, public safety and other needs have been removed.

"The work outlined in these projects demonstrates the critical role of research in advancing racial equity in our communities," said Belinda Sturm, interim vice chancellor for research. "The recipients represent a range of disciplines and expertise — art, psychology, social welfare and history — underscoring the reality that creating lasting impact through research requires wide and interdisciplinary engagement of scholars."

The project teams — representing five units across the university — were chosen through a peer-reviewed competition co-sponsored by the Office of Research and the Hall Center for the Humanities. They each will receive approximately \$20,000 to support their work.

"As a leading research university, KU's commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging broadens and deepens our knowledge base — both in terms of the experiences and perspectives of the scholars and students that we attract and retain at KU, and in terms of the research and creative projects in which they engage," said Giselle Anatol, interim director of the Hall Center. "This year's awards continue to challenge our university communities, our professions and our society to participate in self-reflection, strive for a more nuanced understanding of the world around us, and push for systemic change."

The recipients will come together this spring and fall for a series of workshops hosted at the Hall Center to exchange ideas and provide feedback on each other's work as it progresses. KU has funded 18 projects through the Racial Equity Awards program, which launched in 2021 and is supported by foundation dollars.

Learn more about this year's projects:

Bold Women+ Exhibition: Highlighting the Work of Black, Indigenous and Other Women+ of Color

Susan Earle, curator of European & American Art, Spencer Museum of Art



Susan Earle

Earle will organize a major exhibition of artworks in spring 2025. Featuring approximately 80 works in a variety of mediums, the project will compellingly demonstrate in visual and interpretive form that women+ artists — especially Black, Indigenous and other women of color, as well as LGBTQ+ and gender-nonconforming people — are key drivers of change, especially in creating work that foregrounds justice and social healing. Together with an accompanying online exhibition, extensive programming and two residencies by artists of color, the exhibition will offer diverse audiences in the Lawrence and Kansas City region the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the profound roles of women+ of color as artists and change-makers.

The Development of a New Perinatal Eating Disorder Screening Tool for Black, Afro-Caribbean and African American Individuals

Kelsie Forbush, professor of psychology, Life Span Institute



Kelsie Forbush

Unique risk factors during the perinatal period (during pregnancy and soon after giving birth) may worsen preexisting eating disorders or lead to the development of a new eating disorder in at-risk individuals. Few studies have examined whether existing eating disorder screening tools are reliable and valid in perinatal individuals. Thus, health care providers may be more likely to rely on clinical judgment alone to determine

when further evaluation or referral is needed. Given that both health care providers and the public often believe untrue stereotypes that eating disorders only affect wealthy, young, white girls, eating disorders among racially minoritized individuals often go undetected and untreated, contributing to mental health disparities. Using a community participatory framework, Forbush and doctoral student Marianna Thomeczek will partner with Uzazi Village, a nonprofit organization in Kansas City, to develop a racially inclusive perinatal eating disorder screen. The resulting tool will help prevent serious eating disorders from slipping through the cracks of the medical system and promote racial mental health equity.

“Unsettled Lawrence”: Challenging Collective Memory of Settlement Through the Oral and Public Histories of Unhoused Populations in Lawrence

Rachel Schwaller, multiterm lecturer in history



Rachel Schwaller

The “Unsettled Lawrence” public history project will center houseless encampment as a type of settlement rather than an opposite of settlement. Schwaller and Molly Adams — a KU graduate student in Indigenous studies, citizen of the Cherokee Nation and photojournalist at the Lawrence Times — will engage in a combination of oral history and co-participant documentary photography. This work will culminate in a public art exhibition that aims to uproot current historical memory of Lawrence and recenter unsettlement as a key part of the city’s history, showcasing the amount of construction, knowledge, skill and creativity it takes to build a sustainable campsite in this community. Since Lawrence began to document unhoused people in the late 1980s, Black, Hispanic, Indigenous and mixed-race unhoused individuals have been overrepresented relative to their demographic population. This project ultimately aspires to deracialize and decolonize perspectives of settlement — that there is only one legitimate way to settle in Lawrence.

Stand Up KC Community Archive

Tadeo Weiner-Davis, assistant professor of social welfare



Tadeo Weiner-Davis

Women and people of color in the United States are employed in fast food and fast casual restaurants at disproportionate rates. Stand Up KC, a Kansas City, Missouri-based organization, has been at the forefront of fighting for higher wages and better working conditions for poor workers and workers of color in the restaurant industry since the mid-2000s. Stand Up KC has served as the Kansas City chapter for the largely successful national Fight-for-\$15 movement for over a decade, amassing an impressive number of documents, artifacts and stories through its labor organizing and protest activity. Weiner-Davis will launch a sustainable community archive commemorating this important piece of local, labor and Black history. The digital archive will store oral histories of workers and supporters, as well as organizational and protest documents. Crucially, all decisions about artifact curation and representation will be made in consultation with Stand Up KC members and staff, including a worker advisory board. Community archives are a tool for community groups typically excluded or misrepresented in mainstream culture to represent themselves, build community and practice self-determination.