

Reclaiming Home: An Emancipation Proclamation as Witnessed in the Art of TJ Reddy

A man child, age three, sits in front of a mirror. His hands claim his focus. Dark bronze knuckles opening and closing the unknown worlds mapped in his earth-tinted palms. The child studies the lines in his hands, then his face in the mirror. "As I sat there in the mirror looking into my eyes and looking at my hands, I became aware of myself." Then he notices the floor pulsing to the beat of a blues song playing in the other room. "It was then that I realized I was alive. This is my very first memory."

TJ Reddy is still alive. "Six and a half decades and I'm still here. I wouldn't change my life for anything. I have done some of the most wonderful things and have been rewarded with some of the most awesome gifts," Reddy said. "I feel like there is a balance and if I keel over and start pushing up daisies right now I have no qualms. I have no regrets. Most of what I've done, I'd do it all over again. My legacy is being here now, after all the ordeals I've gone through. I'm here now. I'm still here."

Reddy testifies to his life's journey in his work. As a visual artist, performer and writer he has touched every corner of the Carolinas. Whether artist in residence at a university, being featured in a museum exhibit or completing a mural for a school or neighborhood, Reddy's work has become a part of North Carolina's root system. Reddy says he stays here because this is where he started.

"My family is from North Carolina. I grew up in Savannah, but my great-great grandfather is from Wilson, NC." Reddy's eyes refocus as he fixes on his forefather's memory. "If you see a picture of my great-great-grandfather people say, 'Oh he looks just like you.' His look is tense. He's a powerful-looking man."

"He was run out of here," Reddy says. William Grier Farmer, according to family lore, was born in the 1850s and in the early 1900s worked as an NAACP organizer. As a youth in Wilson, NC, Farmer was confronted and attacked one night by three white teens. His life was changed forever.

"Some white boys decided that they wanted to make him a victim of their abuse and started to attack him and he fought back. Just armed himself with lots of rocks and bricks and stuff and bloodied some of them," Reddy recounts. "And they decided, the parents of the youth who made the initial attack, they decided that my grandfather would have to be taken to the public square, tied to the stockade and whipped. Overnight he left and ended up in Savannah because that wasn't going to be allowed. My great-great-grandparents said, 'No.' So, they eased him on out of here."

April C. Turner, a native of Charlotte, NC, is an accomplished playwright, film actress, and theatre producer. Her produced writing credits include *C.O.T.O.: Chocolate on the Outside*, *Reservations*, *Starlight and Moonshine Times*, *Pickle & Lil' Junior* and *Nikky's Gone*. Ms. Turner's residencies, workshops and theatrical innovations have made her a favorite among community centers, schools and cultural organizations nationwide. She uses the arts to expose individuals and communities to new ideas while offering artistic methods for maximizing potential. She is currently working on her first novel, *No Bridges to My Island*.

Aside from a physical resemblance to William Grier Farmer, Reddy requires the same dignity and unrelenting self-determination his ancestor demanded. When asked why he works in Charlotte as opposed to more high-profile arts communities like Los Angeles or Paris, Reddy says he enjoys a measure of completeness in being able to live in North Carolina as an artist, on his own terms.

“All of that is my legacy. I think that some of that underpinning or that foundation for my being started here. I am free to be wherever I want to be. No one can run me away from any place that I choose to be. You cannot run me away. When I am ready to go, I will. But it’s not going to be because of anybody’s terrorism, anybody’s hate. It’s not going to happen,” Reddy says. “In a sense, part of it has to do with my right to be in the face of whatever it is that seeks to undermine that, so I stand for my rights. I can be wherever I want to be.”

Reddy’s relationship to his history and his ancestors motivates his work and renders a tremendous influence on his ideas about life and legacy. His connection to William Grier Farmer anchors him to North Carolina. “That’s one thing [that keeps me here]. The other thing is unbeknownst to me I have encountered some of the most creatively gifted people in North Carolina that I could have ever hoped to see or get to meet. Also, I am a southerner. I have a great affinity for the area,” Reddy says. The convergence of his personal legacy with his affection for southern culture makes North Carolina the perfect place for Reddy to create deep, compelling work that shapes the understanding of a collective experience.

The Blues Is Wisdom

That night, his first moment of awareness, sitting on the floor, feeling the music vibrate under his body, Reddy says he began to understand the blues. This understanding launched his symbiotic journey as an artist and quest for wisdom.

“I used to fly kites all the time. I kept my head to the sky and would look into the blue. Blue is the color of spirituality. I had kites so far the string would be almost to the ground and I would look into this blue. I was usually on the top of a hill or a house so I couldn’t see anything else around me, just the blue. And even when I paint now, my paintings all are, they’re all glazed with blue . . .” Reddy said.

His contemplation of the nature of The Blues prompts him to imagine how this force came to be as it relates to color, song, written and spoken word. Further, connecting with the nature of blues perhaps beginning at the point of detachment from everything one knows and everything one loves. “Imagine you’re put into this vessel. And you’re looking out through this little sliver of space where you see blue. The blue of sky and the blue of water. Where does one end and one begin? Where does the blue of sky begin and the blue of water begin?” Reddy wonders. He tilts his head to one side, re-enacting the stillness of an enslaved African in the gut of a slave vessel.

“You’re cargo in a captive slave ship and you’re looking through this space, a very narrow window of opportunity and you see blue. And you can’t tell where the blue of the sky is and where the blue of the water is, it’s all blue, but one is air and one is water. And you, you are the wind and you are the water.”