

Healing and Repair from a History of Flooding in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Photo credits: Philadelphia Water Department

Artist:

- **Trapeta B. Mayson**, Poet/Teaching Artist/
Community Organizer, City of Philadelphia
2020–2021 Poet Laureate

Philadelphia Water Department:

- **Glen Abrams**, Deputy Commissioner,
Communications and Engagement
- **Herbie Hickmott**, Senior Graphic Designer
- **Maura Jarvis**, Community Outreach
Specialist
- **Tiffany Ledesma**, former Public
Engagement Team Manager
- **Grace Maiorano**, Communications Consultant

Background

Like many places, Philadelphia is experiencing a range of climate impacts: more extreme storms with increased rainfall, hotter summers, and rising sea levels in tidal areas. These problems are expected to accelerate in the coming decades. Climate change is also a well-known “threat multiplier” for other kinds of inequality. For example, during heat events, some neighborhoods in Philadelphia are 22 degrees hotter than other areas of the city due to a lack of green space and tree cover.¹ Impacted neighborhoods are often low-income and/or communities of color. Similarly, some neighborhoods are much more likely to experience infrastructure flooding due to shifting precipitation patterns and insufficient combined sewer capacity to manage rain events. As Maura Jarvis, Community Outreach Specialist at the Philadelphia Water Department (PWD), explains, “climate change is not only a public health issue, but also an issue of racial and social equity.” The utility is working to engage more deeply with communities facing inequitable exposure to water-related natural hazards and create equitable mitigation and adaptation strategies.

PWD’s interest in the Arts Accelerator stemmed from a desire to look for creative interventions and deeper community connections with Germantown residents, a predominantly Black community in Philadelphia with residential areas prone to flooding. A large swath of Germantown was developed over the Wingohocking Creek, which became part of the city’s combined sewer system in the late 1800s.² However, the system was not built to handle the size of today’s population or increasingly heavy rains. Frequent flooding that the neighborhood now experiences is projected to become more severe as climate change progresses. While the utility is working to address longer-term physical infrastructure issues, empowering residents with critical knowledge to protect themselves is key to reducing the impact of present-day flooding. In the utility’s words, they hoped that working “more deeply with the community on this topic through an artistic process would create significantly stronger partnerships in impacted neighborhoods and ultimately more successful flood mitigation measures embraced by local residents.”

Germantown residents compose their own verses at poetry workshops. *Photo credit: Philadelphia Water Department*



PWD previously participated in the initiative that led to the US Water Alliance's report, *Water Rising: Equitable Approaches to Urban Flooding*, working with city partners and community representatives from Germantown to identify flood mitigation priorities and strategies to address these chronic issues.³ The utility also had experience using arts and creative strategies to engage people around water through initiatives like *Drink More Tap* (<https://water.phila.gov/drops/drink-more-tap/>), which uses new murals and original music to inform residents about the high quality of Philadelphia's tap water. Staff had some sense of what arts and culture engagement could look like, and they were excited to try new community engagement approaches through their participation in the Accelerator. PWD saw the opportunity to operate differently by working with a community-based artist to engage residents more holistically in the creative process and generate a healing conversation.

Artist Recruitment and Selection

PWD engaged community residents as decision-makers from the beginning, involving them in shaping the Request for Proposals (RFP) and selecting the artist. In 2020, the utility launched a *Germantown Community Flood Risk Management Task Force*⁴ to provide opportunities for community leaders to engage with city officials around concerns associated with flooding. The goal of the Task Force is to increase information sharing, expand flood preparation knowledge in the community, and reduce flood impacts in Germantown in a manner that is informed by community stakeholders. In December 2020, the utility invited the Task Force to come together and brainstorm around the Accelerator opportunity, and this input informed the call that PWD put out for an artist.⁵ To make sure the call was widely promoted in Germantown, they led outreach at local coffee shops, churches, and other community hubs. The utility also sent targeted communications on NextDoor and via email to customers in the ZIP code. PWD received 15 submissions from a variety of artists, community members, organizers, and business owners.

The utility asked Benny Starr, the US Water Alliance's Artist-in-Residence, to join their selection panel, which also included utility staff and members of the Germantown community. Together, this group selected Trapeta B. Mayson, Philadelphia's 2020–2021 Poet Laureate, who lives in the Germantown neighborhood and has a deep practice of engaging the community in her work. She was thrilled by the opportunity to do something in and with her own community. "What drew me to this was the idea that I can be in my own community and partner with an organization that has resources to engage people deeply. Oftentimes, artists who live in impacted communities don't have resources to do as much as they want to or can."

Grace Maiorano, Communications Specialist at the utility, notes, "Benny really helped us think differently about how we evaluated what we received. He helped us break down what we were looking for and why. That made it easy for the group to select Trapeta as our artist. We weren't looking for an artist to submit a project plan; we wanted someone who could help co-design something with the residents of Germantown." PWD knew that working with an artist to meet community engagement goals required them to be active participants in the project as well. Artists bring unique skills and perspectives to the table that can engage communities in new ways, but PWD knew that Trapeta, nor any artist, could singlehandedly "solve" the complex water challenges facing the community, nor did they expect her to be the sole or primary liaison between the utility and the community. From the beginning, PWD understood Trapeta as an important partner in a community-utility relationship already underway, and that would continue long after the Accelerator project was finished.

It was very helpful for the PWD team that the Alliance contracted directly with Trapeta, as it gave the utility more flexibility than their typical contracting process for a short-term project. Tiffany Ledesma, former Public Engagement Team Manager for the utility, says, "the fact that we didn't have to go through our standard contracting process gave us the freedom to take our time planning with Trapeta and even extend the timeline because the project called for it. It allowed us to be more creative and take more risks on who we partnered with and how. Ultimately, it made improved the design."

Artist Spotlight: Trapeta B. Mayson



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Artistic Practice(s):

Trapeta is a poet and social worker, combining these perspectives in her work as a community-based teaching artist. She uses poetry to speak to the lived experience of everyday people, build community, promote healing, and create social change.

Portfolio:

www.trapetamayson.com

Photo Credit: Ed Cunnicelli

Approach: Community Storytelling

The team began the partnership by setting up weekly meetings to get to know each other, refine their goals, and brainstorm. Trapeta wanted to engage with the community as soon as possible, viewing them as key co-creators of the project. Her background as a licensed clinical social worker and poet whose practice is embedded in community-based arts led her to suggest centering the project around community storytelling: the story of the neighborhood's historic creek and development, the story of the utility's challenges and efforts to address the flooding, and most importantly, the personal stories of the residents. To realize this idea, the team developed a structure that would invite community members to co-create the story of the neighborhood's relationship with water.

Pilot Project: *Wingo-WHAT?! Water History Art Transformation*

Eventually, the team settled on the name *Wingo-WHAT?! for the project*, a play on the unknown history of the covered creek. The acronym stands for Water History Arts Activation Transformation (WHAT) and expresses the team's hope that the project will help catalyze greater "connection and accountability to the land, to our stories, and to the community."

The team held one virtual and five in-person storytelling and poetry workshops at three locations in the neighborhood: a library, the Farm at Awbury Arboretum, and a park near an intersection that frequently floods. At the Farm, goats accompanied participants on a walk by the only visible remains of the Wingohocking Creek, where they stopped periodically to read poetry. At each workshop, Trapeta guided participants through expressing their memories and experiences of water through prompts like: *When flooding happens, this is what it means to me...* and *What I want people to know about this community is....* Prompts provided a jumping-off point for conversations and for participants to create their own poems. Trapeta says, "I wanted to understand what the flooding meant to them, in *their own lives*. We know there is a lot of trauma associated with that. But I also want residents to determine what story we tell about the neighborhood. How do the residents want to reframe what they are experiencing?"

To help draw people in and set a welcoming tone, Trapeta hired internationally acclaimed jazz musician and Germantown resident Monnette Sudler and percussionist Karen Smith to play at the workshops. As one resident danced to the music, she talked about how she had lost all her possessions in a part of her house because of a flood. Trapeta recalls, “it was heartbreaking and beautiful.”

Utility staff were present at the workshops to listen and provide residents with information and resources about flooding, including how they can prepare and protect themselves and what the utility is doing to address long-term flooding and infrastructure needs. Over 100 people attended these in-person workshops.

Trapeta will now use the community’s poems to create a collective long-form poem that will be shared back with the community through various methods like sidewalk art that is revealed when it rains, vinyl decals with poetry throughout the neighborhood, and online. This will be a way of reflecting the community and their collective narrative back to residents. The project culminated in a big block party in June 2022. Trapeta, participants in the poetry workshops, musicians, and other artists joined PWD and the community as they celebrated the power of poetry and storytelling.

Learn more about *Wingo-WHAT?!* here: <https://water.phila.gov/wingo-what/>.

Germantown residents read their original poems at the *Wingo-WHAT?!* community event in June 2022. Photo credit: Philadelphia Water Department



Lessons Learned

Time invested in team building and planning pays off.

From the start, the Philadelphia team committed to weekly meetings together, even before they had a concrete project developed. In the beginning, most of this time involved listening to each other’s goals and learning about each other’s processes, as well as sharing what they knew and had discovered about the neighborhood during the investigation process—one of the exploratory exercises that was part of the Accelerator. This created a strong working rapport and trust between utility staff and their arts partner. By the time they were ready engage with the community, they felt highly prepared and aligned in purpose and values. Trapeta’s professionalism and experience with community-based projects was integral to the success of this relationship. Both parties made this project a priority: the utility staff committed to these meetings and worked around Trapeta’s teaching schedule, while Trapeta used paid leave to take time off from her day job for longer meetings.

Artistic processes can create space for healing and connection.

Chronic infrastructure flooding has impacted the Germantown community greatly, and there is widespread mistrust of the utility and other city officials because of historic neglect and underinvestment. One of the key goals of the project was to build trust, which first required acknowledging past mistakes and giving the community space to share their feelings and experiences. While not all of the community’s traumatic experiences were related to the utility, PWD understood the importance of holding space for these multi-layered and sometimes difficult conversations as a part of trust-building. According to Tiffany, “we are thinking about healing the past and preparedness for the future at the same time. We want to build trust with the community and help them feel prepared for future flooding. And we want them to feel that they can count on the City to help them through those events when they do occur.” The poetry workshops were an effective way to do this, she says, because “you can’t heal what you can’t feel.”



2020–2021 Philadelphia Poet Laureate Trapeta B. Mayson reads an original poem at the *Wingo-WHAT?!* community event in June 2022. Photo credit: Philadelphia Water Department

Spoken word and poetry allowed for more personal, authentic conversations than a typical utility workshop or meeting focused on infrastructure solutions would have. People were able to express deeper feelings and find points of human connection. Emotions were sometimes raw; tears were shed by both community members and utility representatives. But these conversations created an invaluable foundation for a relationship that the utility can continue to develop in future work. It also provided an important reminder for utility staff of the importance of what they do and why they do it.

PWD is now advancing a very large capital project to address infrastructure flooding in the impacted area of the Germantown neighborhood. Deputy Commissioner of Communications and Engagement Glen Abrams notes they integrated community engagement earlier in that process because of the Accelerator project's success. He says the Accelerator provides "foundational work that we can build on" to engage the community in the process. PWD will use the creative techniques learned in this process—like using conversation cards with prompts—while working to reinvigorate upcoming Task Force meetings.

Art is a catalyst, not a panacea.

From the beginning, the PWD team felt it was important not to trivialize the community's experience with flooding by giving the impression that they thought an art project alone would heal past harms or solve the profound challenges it faces. They knew the artistic process could be a powerful piece of the puzzle *if* accompanied by acknowledgment of past failings and concrete investments to improve equity in the future. Because PWD is concurrently working on an infrastructure plan to address flooding, staff were able to situate the artistic project in relation to that larger arc of work.

PWD also accepted it was not enough for Trapeta to be the ambassador of the utility. Utility staff had to be in the room to hear directly from community members, understand their experiences, and connect on an emotional level. As Tiffany says, "we can't outsource our community engagement or put the artist in the position of responding to people's hurt and anger. It wouldn't be fair to the artist or the community." Moreover, the utility staff in the room had to think beyond solving infrastructure challenges by being "sensitive to humanity and trauma-informed."

Being a licensed clinical social worker from the neighborhood, Trapeta could skillfully facilitate complicated dynamics in the community meetings, even when difficult emotions came up. She emphasized this might not be something all artists feel comfortable facilitating. "Not everyone is prepared to handle that level of emotional release, that anger," Trapeta says. "For artists, it is important to be aware of how you are entering the community. Some artists may want to go deep, but it can be harmful for the community if you don't know what you are doing."

Residents joined musicians at the *Wingo-WHAT?!* community event in June 2022. Photo credit: Philadelphia Water Department



Challenges and Tensions

Making the internal case for the value of deeper community engagement.

The team involved in this process understands and embraces the value and importance of embracing creative and artistic processes, as well as engaging communities in this way. PWD staff saw firsthand the transformation that can occur. However, Glen notes that they are struggling to know how to translate this information to others in the utility who “usually see outreach as a means to an end” by getting a plan approved or informing the community about a new program. Tiffany concurs, saying, “it is challenging to convince others who don’t get why we should be spending time and resources on the arts. Evaluation using metrics that matter to them will be important to make the case to engineers and technicians.” PWD will analyze insights and lessons learned and communicate about the work to a wide range of audiences and stakeholders.

Bringing light to an intermittent issue that may not be top-of-mind.

Germantown has issues aside from climate change and flooding, some of which feel much more acute and urgent. As a result, it was sometimes challenging to attract the community’s attention to the topic. Trapeta notes, “sparking conversation around a specific issue that only comes up for people at certain times (like when there is a historic rain event) when there are so many other immediate issues impacting them on a daily basis—gun violence, gentrification, food security, and jobs—can be difficult. Flooding isn’t always top of mind or may not feel like the most important thing in their lives, despite its devastating impacts when it occurs.”

Overcoming mistrust.

One of the workshops took place at the intersection of Crittenden and Haines streets, a block that experiences a particularly high incidence of flooding. The workshop was hosted in a park that is bordered by a wooden gate. Many residents walked by and seemed curious about the workshop but declined to cross the gate to engage with the utility team, even when invited. One man who participated and took the utility’s survey told Maura: “You know what? They were

really good questions. They were asking about climate change.” By connecting authentically with communities, PWD was able to ignite discussions on issues like climate change that are often overshadowed by more immediate concerns for residents. Maura interprets it this way: “there is a lot of trauma in this community, and the City hasn’t always been there when bad things happen. We tried twice. A lot of people still didn’t come out, although some were curious. That just means we need to do it more often.” Consistency and reliability—the utility showing up regularly and following through with their word—are key to building more trusting relationships.

At the Wingo-WHAT?! celebration, PWD staff participate in ongoing and meaningful community engagement. Photo credit: Philadelphia Water Department



Adapting to real-world events.

Like all the Accelerator teams, COVID-19 made meeting in person challenging, but the Philadelphia team felt like in-person connections were necessary for their project, so they met outside and made other accommodations for safety. As they were preparing for a workshop in a flood-prone area, Hurricane Ida hit. “We realized that some residents might be busy dealing with property damage and flood fallout afterwards,” says Maura. The utility considered canceling the workshops, but instead simply postponed and went ahead the following week. Because Ida had made the flood risk an immediate reality, the conversations with residents were “profound.”

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Tiffany Ledesma, former Public Engagement Team Manager, Philadelphia Water Department

Read the full compendium here: <http://uswateralliance.org/initiatives/water-arts-and-culture-accelerator>.

Rain-activated community poems and project information remain etched on sidewalks in flood-prone areas around Germantown.

Photo credit: Philadelphia Water Department



Notes

- 1 City of Philadelphia, *Beat the Heat: Hunting Park—A Community Relief Heat Plan* (City of Philadelphia: Office of Sustainability, 2019), https://www.phila.gov/media/20190719092954/HP_R8print-1.pdf.
- 2 Grace Maiorano, “Germantown Flooding: Community Connections to the Past, Present, & Future,” Philadelphia Water Department, July 28, 2021, <https://water.phila.gov/blog/germantown-flooding-task-force>.
- 3 US Water Alliance, *Water Rising: Equitable Approaches to Urban Flooding* (US Water Alliance, 2020), http://uswateralliance.org/sites/uswateralliance.org/files/publications/Final_USWA_Water%20Rising_0.pdf.
- 4 Grace Maiorano, “Germantown Flooding: Community Connections to the Past, Present, & Future,” Philadelphia Water Department, July 28, 2021, <https://water.phila.gov/blog/germantown-flooding-task-force>.
- 5 “Call for Artists: Germantown Rising Ideas for Community Arts,” Philadelphia Water Department, 2021, accessed June 26, 2022, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Gr6_cRWdurOHjKdSS0UPvpgH3Z8M99AI/view.



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