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Media Contacts:

Jessica Kelley Boucher, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art: (860) 838-4081, jessica.kelley@thewadsworth.org

Vivian Nabeta, Capital Community College: (860) 906-5103, vnabeta@capitalcc.edu

Kimberly Kersey, The Amistad Center for Art & Culture: (860) 838-4122, kkersey@amistadcenter.org



Sarah Lewis Featured at Inaugural Pennington Lecture at Wadsworth Atheneum April 21; Race and Power of Arts & Humanities to be Focus

Lecture Launches New Collaboration Led by Capital Community College, Joined by Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art and The Amistad Center for Art & Culture

Hartford, Conn. (March 8, 2022)—The inaugural Pennington Lecture is part of a series of offerings that bring into focus the history of the former Talcott Street Congregational Church in downtown Hartford. The inaugural lecture, *Vision and Justice*, is to be delivered by Harvard University professor Sarah Lewis on **Thursday, April 21, 2022 at 6pm** at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Attendance is free and open to the public, with a limited number of in-person tickets, and simultaneous live-stream. A 5pm reception precedes the lecture.

The Pennington Lecture, originally proposed by students, is one product of a new joint initiative between Capital Community College, the Wadsworth Atheneum, and The Amistad Center for Art & Culture. The Black Heritage Project, supported by a \$149,426 National Endowment for the Humanities grant, aims to bring the remarkable history of the Talcott Street Congregational Church, the first Black church and school for Black children in Hartford, into public view through a permanent exhibit and new curriculum at Capital Community College, and an annual public lecture that brings prominent speakers to Hartford to address issues of race and justice. The new exhibit, now being planned, will anchor the curriculum being developed at Capital Community College. It will be free and open to the public; anticipated to open in fall 2022.

“We are incredibly grateful to NEH for their funding of this multi-dimensional initiative and pleased to partner with the Wadsworth and The Amistad Center for Art & Culture in making it a reality,” said **Capital Community College CEO, Dr. G. Duncan Harris**. “We especially salute our students, who initiated and advanced this effort, and we are truly energized by the opportunity to reconnect with an important aspect of Hartford history that has been all but lost. There is a remarkable story to tell, and countless lessons to be learned, applicable to our present times and experiences.”

Talcott Street Congregational Church was the center of Black community in mid-nineteenth century Hartford. Although the structure was razed, the church continues to this day as Faith Congregational Church and is a partner in the Black Heritage Project. Talcott Street Church was located just one block from what nearly two centuries later became the home of Capital Community College, attended predominantly by students of color. This annual lecture is named for the Rev. Dr. James W.C. Pennington, a notable leader, educator, and leading abolitionist, who pastored Talcott Street Church in the 1840s and 1850s.

Today all that exists on the original site of the Church is an unused parking garage that Capital Community College students, staff, and faculty walk by daily. There is no marker or exhibit commemorating the site of the Church, which was also a safe haven for fugitives of enslavement finding their way north through the Underground Railroad. Some historians have suggested that at times, fugitives arrived at the doors of the Church daily. This site may well be among the most important locations for understanding the history of the Black community in Hartford. This project aims to change a little known and largely forgotten site into a place of remembrance and inspiration. This site and nearby Capital Community College are just a few blocks from the Wadsworth and The Amistad Center for Art & Culture on Main Street, institutions that have been partners in the Hartford Heritage Project since 2011.

“We are particularly proud to join Capital Community College and The Amistad Center for Art & Culture as the Pennington Lecture launches an historic effort to reveal a little-known chapter in Hartford history, and we look forward to highlighting the consequential role of the Talcott Street Church and School,” said **Jeffrey N. Brown, CEO & Director of the Wadsworth Atheneum**. “Launching the Pennington Lecture with our partners, hearing the perspective of Dr. Sarah Lewis, and learning about the life of Rev. Pennington will be a meaningful and powerful way to begin.”

When it comes to justice, Sarah Lewis knows the power that artists, visionaries, and iconic images have on our society. Having served on President Barack Obama’s Arts Policy Committee, and as Guest-Editor of Aperture’s “Vision & Justice” issue, she zeroes in on the importance of images as indicators of citizenship and catalysts of social change. In this empowering and timely talk, Lewis will combine art history, race, American history, and technical innovation to describe cultural transformation and understanding. She will highlight the crucial nature of art for justice, and how progress can be seen through images.

“This is a remarkable opportunity to give voice to the African American narrative in Connecticut’s capital city, telling untold stories and increasing awareness and understanding of the struggle for social justice during generations past,” said **Kimberly Kersey, Executive Director, The Amistad Center for Art & Culture**. “This is an exciting collaboration and a noteworthy endeavor, touching on education, justice, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. For many, it may cast Hartford history in a new light, and Dr. Lewis will help us to fast forward to today’s challenges.”

In addition to the Pennington Lecture, supporting programs will include:

- a book discussion on *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*, written by Sarah Lewis. It will be held on **Tuesday, April 19 at noon**, with a panel including several Capital faculty and students, to be moderated by Antoinette Brim-Bell, poet and English professor at the College. The discussion will be held at the Wadsworth and available via live stream; in-person tickets are limited; advance registration is strongly encouraged.
- a talk by James Pennington’s biographer, author **Christopher L. Webber**, at a breakfast event at Capital Community College on the morning of the Pennington Lecture, **Thursday, April 21, 8–10am**. Webber’s *American to the Backbone* tells the story of the Rev. Pennington, who escaped enslavement, attended classes at Yale, and rose to prominence internationally as a spokesperson for abolition—a fascinating, forgotten pioneer, whose careful study of the moral basis for civil disobedience was echoed decades later by Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. and helped lay the foundation for the contemporary civil rights revolution. The event is free and open to the public; in-person only.

Information, registration, and tickets for each of the events can be found at capitalcc.edu/pennington.

Dr. Sarah Lewis is an associate professor at Harvard University in the Department of History of Art and Architecture and the Department of African and African American Studies. Her research focuses on the intersection of African American and Black Atlantic visual representation, racial justice, and representational democracy in the United States from the nineteenth century through the present.

Dr. Lewis became the inaugural recipient of the Freedom Scholar Award in 2019, presented by The Association for the Study of African American Life and History. The award honors Lewis for her body of work and its “direct positive impact on the life of African-Americans.” In 2021, Lewis was the recipient of the Frieze New York tribute for her Vision & Justice Project. Her essays on race, contemporary art and culture have been published in many journals, newspapers and periodicals. Before joining the faculty at Harvard, she held curatorial positions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and the Tate Modern, London. She received her bachelor’s degree from Harvard University, an M. Phil. from Oxford University, and her Ph.D. from Yale University.



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The Pennington Lecture was originally proposed by students in the Liberal Arts Action Lab, a collaboration between Capital Community College and Trinity College. It is presented with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Capital Community College Foundation, and Liberty Bank.

The panel discussion and talk by Christopher Webber are presented with support by CT Humanities.

About Capital Community College

Capital Community College is an urban, two-year institution enrolling more than 3,000 students in Connecticut’s capital city. The college offers 60 academic programs in accredited studies preparing students for associate degrees, certificates, and transfer, while its non-credit offerings prepare students for the immediate needs of the Connecticut workforce. Capital, one of New England’s most diverse campuses, was the first college in Connecticut to be designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution. The Capital Community College experience revolves around its historic eleven-story, Art Deco building in the heart of downtown Hartford, which offers unprecedented access to the city’s cultural and employment offerings.

About the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

Founded in 1842 with a vision for infusing art into the American experience, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is home to a collection of nearly 50,000 works of art spanning 5,000 years and encompassing European art from antiquity through contemporary as well as American art from the 1600s to today. The Wadsworth Atheneum’s five connected buildings—representing architectural styles including Gothic Revival, modern International Style, and 1960s Brutalism—are located at 600 Main Street in Hartford, Conn. Current hours are noon–5pm Thursday–Sunday. Admission: \$5–15; discounts for members, students, and seniors. Free admission for Hartford residents with Wadsworth Welcome registration. Free “happy hour” admission 4–5pm. Advance ticket registration via thewadsworth.org is encouraged, not required. Phone: (860) 278- 2670; website: thewadsworth.org.

About The Amistad Center for Art & Culture

In 1987, a handful of visionaries that included Trustees and staff of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, joined forces with independent foundations, corporations and the State of Connecticut and formed The Amistad Foundation in order to purchase, protect and provide public access to the Randolph Linsly Simpson Collection then housed in the collector’s farmhouse in Northford, CT. This extraordinary collection, which now consists of 7,000 works of art, artifacts and archives, documents more than 300 years of the artistic, literary, military, enslaved and free life of Blacks in America—truly a treasure and a rich resource of immense educational value and testimony to America’s diverse and dynamic culture. In addition to collection care and development, The Amistad Foundation was intended to take on the broader tasks of preserving and interpreting African American culture and history and correcting the misrepresentation and under-representation of this important aspect of our country’s evolution.

Image credit: Photograph of Dr. Sarah Lewis by Annie Leibovitz.

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