

The Migrations Cosmogram



A cosmogram is a symbolic reminder of the connection between the spiritual and physical worlds. It is a graphic representation of a traditional African circular ceremonial ground marking. In West and Central Africa the circle has great historical and cultural significance. When African people, particularly the BiKongo of the Republic of the Congo and the Yoruba of Nigeria, were involuntarily brought to the Americas, their beliefs, values and traditions came with them. These cultural manifestations included those associated with the cosmogram as a healing sacred space.

The Migrations Cosmogram of the Children's Education Village of the National Black Arts Festival (NBAF) reflects the belief that the history of the African Diaspora is the story of the migration of African cultures, including their languages, throughout the world. The symbolism found in the Migrations Cosmogram, and described in detail below, includes the African family, the compass rose, water, a torch, and the use of the colors red, black, green, purple and yellow.

The Migrations Cosmogram was inspired by the work of the artistic team of Houston Conwill, a sculptor, Estella Conwill Majoza, a poet; and Joseph DePace, an architect, who created, among their other site specific installations, the *New Charleston Cosmogram* for the Spoleto Festival in 1991 and the *New Ring Shout Cosmogram* to commemorate the African Burial Ground in 2003. These public works address the ideas of human and civil rights. Similar to these and other such works, the Migrations Cosmogram uses symbolism to teach the story of the African Diaspora.

The Migrations Cosmogram was created in 2002 by Ms. Darlene Watkins, a freelance graphic artist, to symbolize the African Diaspora. The Cosmogram was then animated by Mr. Torin Malone, a computer graphics specialist, to be used to introduce the study guide for the NBAF African American History Quiz Bowl. In 2005, Mr. Paul Thomason, an Assistant Professor and resident scene designer for the Drama and Dance Department of Spelman College, constructed and installed the Migrations Cosmogram for the 2005 NBAF Children's Education Village held at the Woodruff Arts Center (Atlanta). In 2005 Dr. Collette Hopkins, Consulting Director of Education and Family Programs for NBAF, developed a curriculum guide for teaching the Migrations Cosmogram.

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The Symbolism of the Migrations Cosmogram

At the center of the Migrations Cosmogram are images of a father, mother and child designed to depict the unity of the *African Family*. The *child* represents the future of African people. When the Migrations Cosmogram is animated the family moves as one, freely through the African Diaspora.

A *compass rose* serves as the background of the Cosmogram and depicts the "seeding" of African people, with their cultures and languages, throughout the African Diaspora. The construct of the compass rose is used to teach the various forms of migration experienced by people of African descent.

A background of *water* depicts the capture and forced migration of millions of enslaved African people during the "Trans-Atlantic Trade."

A *torch*, which appears when the Migrations Cosmogram is animated, depicts enlightenment or knowledge reflective of the Akan (Ghana) concept of *Sankofa* (learning from the past).

The *grass* of the animated Cosmogram represents the relationship between African and other indigenous people to Mother Earth.

The Migrations Cosmogram incorporates the symbolic use of color. *Black*, the most dominant color, represents African people. *Green* represents Africa, the Motherland of the people of the African Diaspora. *Red* represents the worldwide struggle of African people for freedom, justice and equality. *Purple* represents the regency and nobility of African kings and queens. *Yellow* represents the sun and depicts the energy and strength of the people of the African Diaspora.

When animated, the compass rose spins and the African family moves across the Earth with a brightly lit torch in search of freedom.



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The Installation of the Migrations Cosmogram

The Migrations Cosmogram is always installed in exact geographic orientation. A chain linked, white fence with eight posts is used to designate the sacred, healing space represented by the cosmogram. Six small sweetgrass coil baskets, one clear glass bowl of water and an empty wooden bowl are each placed at one of the eight posts. The six baskets contain representations of the African Diaspora. One basket contains cowry shells, another silver coins from the countries of the Diaspora, one contains cotton from the Sea Islands, another contains Carolina Gold Rice, one contains trade beads from Ghana, and the final basket contains indigo from Nigeria. The bowl of water represents the Atlanta Ocean and is a tribute to the African people who suffered due to the inhumanity of forced migration and the cruelty of enslavement. The wooden bowl is symbolically empty yet full of the spirits of the heroic sons and daughters of the African Diaspora. A ceremonial drum, created specifically for this installation, stands symbolically silent while in the background Bob Marley sings "Songs of Freedom."

