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CUNY Poets Win Two Pulitzer Prizes in Three Years

Tyehimba Jess and Gregory Pardlo say the awards are a testament to the artistic vitality that comes from working in a diverse academic community

By Thomas MacMillan.

Shortly after a text message this week alerted him that he had won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for poetry, Tyehimba Jess called a fellow poet who he knew could relate, fellow City University of New York scholar Gregory Pardlo, who won the same prize in 2015.

In just three years, two poets from the CUNY system of public colleges and universities have won the Pulitzer. And this year, Sarah DeLappe, a graduate student at CUNY's Brooklyn College was a finalist for the Pulitzer for drama.

The prizes are a testament to the artistic vitality that comes from working in an economically and racially diverse academic community, the poets said.

Mr. Jess, 51 years old, won the Pulitzer for [his book "Olio,"](#) which uses prose and poetry to examine the lives of 19th-century African-American performers. Mr. Jess, originally from Detroit, said he had been working on the book for about seven years, the same length of time he has been teaching English at CUNY's College of Staten Island.

"I think in terms of CUNY and creativity, you have this wide network of schools that are accessible to people from every income level," Mr. Jess said. The diversity of the school allows it to "harness the creative energy of New York."

Mr. Pardlo, who won the 2015 Pulitzer as a student in CUNY's Graduate Center in Manhattan, said he isn't surprised two such prizes have come to CUNY in three years. "Because of the diversity, we have all these ideas, it is a rich and vibrant intellectual community. And, it being New York, there's a culture of ambition," he said.

With so many students and even faculty who may be the first in their families to go to college, there is a desire to claim a piece of the American dream, but also an awareness of the complexity and “fantasy” of that dream, he said. “The two conflicting currents contribute greatly to the vitality of the art.”

The CUNY system has 245,000 undergraduate students—20% are Asian, 26% are black, 31% Hispanic, and 22% white—according to a spokesman. Nearly 60% receive federal Pell grants for low-income students, and about 38% say they come from households that earn less than \$20,000 a year.

“For many artists working with those students and origins, it’s this atmosphere—this unentitled, open-access atmosphere—that helps feed their souls as well as their imaginations,” said Vita Rabinowitz, CUNY University Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor.

Bill Fritz, president of the College of Staten Island, said he hopes the Pulitzer prizes challenge the myth that an accessible education is a low-quality education. “I think vindication is a good word for it,” he said.