

Cylantra Dees

Cylantra Dees grew up in a racially and culturally diverse household in Florida, surrounded by strong women who were frequently in precarious situations. A sex worker, her mother's close community provided lessons about powerful solidarity between women, as well as the powerlessness that results from abuse and hardship. Surrounded by constant streams of conversation, Cylantra developed a passion and a talent for storytelling and poetry, a sensitivity to class, race, and gender oppression, and a deep appreciation for the value of collective struggle. Her drive to give voice to the women who shaped her has led to her skillful writing and the pursuit of social justice journalism grounded in the lives of working people.



Cylantra was a first generation college student at Spelman College, an historically Black women's college in Atlanta. She majored in Comparative Women's Studies and minored in Creative Writing, graduating Magna Cum Laude. She was impatient to see greater student engagement in social justice advocacy and initiated efforts to involve students in arts-activism projects in Atlanta, including a Tent City sit-in and urban garden arts projects. As a member of the Honors Program, she led the effort to revive Spelman's radical literary journal, "Aunt Chloe". She became Editor and her team encouraged students to submit works of poetry and prose, framed by a scholarly feminist lens. Cylantra was invited to become a Social Justice Fellow, joining a living-learning community where she extended her activism to issues such as reproductive and gender rights. Additionally, she was the Community Liaison for Afrekete, Spelman's LGBTQ+ club.

Travelling to Cuba to participate in and document an agricultural work brigade was an exhilarating and formative experience. Cylantra joined hundreds of thousands of workers in the Workers Day (May Day) celebrations. She credits her time in Cuba with deepening her commitment to social justice journalism and international labor solidarity.

In her application, Cylantra said, "I have become more driven to explore the ways in which working class journalism can contribute to social justice movements. I believe that earning an MA in Labor Studies will honor my concern for human rights, connect me to a network of activists, and allow me to continue my commitment and responsibility to communicate workers' struggles beyond the institution."

One of Cylantra's recommenders noted, "Cylantra is an intellectually curious student whose commitment to social justice advocacy and storytelling is evident in all she does. Her passion for justice for persons whose voices are sometimes silenced will be well supported by [your] graduate program."