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Liberating Powers: Community Building in Word, in Deed (2021 Conference on Community Writing Keynote Address)

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2021 Conference on Community Writing Keynote Address

Liberating Powers: Community Building in Word, in Deed

Brigette Rouson

Julian Clement Chase Award Ceremony
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Giving thanks to the Creator, the conference organizers, especially Phyllis and Veronica, Cassandra for her generous intro. Special thanks to the family of Julian Clement Chase, and all who join in this emergent and urgent imagining of ourselves in community.

This keynote offers ways to make meaning of who we are and how we be, from our inner selves to collective formations. My intention is to offer principles and practice to build together for liberation and affirm the importance of communicating as we say “yes” to this awesome endeavor.

1. Who/where/when I enter . . .

I speak as a daughter of Vivian and Ervin, dedicating this keynote to Black parents who nurtured five Black children in a South of honey-baked racism, yet found recipes for progress. My parents served as educators, active in community leadership, who purposed every structure (neighborhood, church, sorority, fraternity, media) to make Black lives matter and create the Beloved Community—even before we used those terms.

I speak as a self-identified fugitive from university life, who left the ivory tower—part choice, part “constructive eviction”—to earn a living, co-parent, and follow new paths as resource organizer and “capacity builder.” At the outset, I guided grantmaking for girls and young women leading change.

I speak as an East coast native beholding the beauty of every people and place in “Turtle Island” and beyond, supporting rematriation of indigenous land (Sogorea Te’ Land Trust).

I speak seeking to walk in the world as abolitionist, since attending that first Critical Resistance Conference at UC-Berkeley in 1998. I speak as a feminist (and womanist) for as long as I can remember, trauma survivor, activist, one who revels in movement, music lover (including my son’s jazz), reader of Afro-futurism and historical accounts of liberation (Kelly’s *Freedom Dreams*, Ortiz), and always an unapologetic “race woman” for our times. In the words of trailblazer Anna Julia Cooper,

“Only the Black Woman can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, ... then and there the whole [Negro] race enters with me.’—Anna Julia Cooper (Chimanga).

Finally, I speak as a microcosm and ever-present possibility of the communal, inspired by the **concept of Ubuntu—I am because we are, and because we are, I am.** Community.

2. Community Is Liberation

With the wisdom of the ancestors and many countless people living embodied now, I define liberation as the assurance that everyone’s needs and human rights are honored—and, more, we all lead mutually fulfilling lives in solidarity and joy.

Community is the site and shaper of liberation. Its sinews are substance—creating a muscular experience of being held on a collective journey. Community is source and it is system.

It’s my amazing good fortune to work supporting social justice organizations to internalize racial justice with an intersectional lens. t the core is a call to give care on multiple levels of system—the inner/individual, the interpersonal, the institutional and societal. These are levels of who we are and how we roll, reflected in structures, practices, policies, group dynamics and organizational culture. It is this work from which I offer insights and invitations for you today.

In my work, a major commitment is to center relationships, and center Blackness—rooting out white supremacy, patriarchy, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism—and practicing language justice. We reimagine what community can be without relentless homage to racial capitalism that insinuates itself into our bones, into our ways of being, and breaks us even as it pretends to sustain us.

For me and my colleagues, now is a time when we support groups to “walk the talk” by aligning internal culture and structures with what they advocate in the world. At best, it’s about being the change—inspired by writers such as adrienne maree brown (*Emergent Strategy*) and Frederic Laloux (*Reinventing Organizations*). It requires devoting huge time and resources, being vulnerable, experimenting and benefiting from lessons of failure *and* success. It can be painful work, yet it yields treasure beyond measure.

We use the Sankofa principle of looking back to move forward. We invite the emergent, the exquisite collective care that makes healing paramount, the extravagance of wild ideas that re-create the commons—one space, one moment at a time—much like the phenomenon that is Sunday drumming in Malcolm X Park, poetically portrayed in this year’s prize-winning monograph. Fortunately, we’ll hear from author Chase Kleber and learn more of this work later in today’s session.

3. Community-Building Is Reclaiming Our Authentic Selves—Our Common Humanity and Divinity

As a midwife of organizational and community change, I embrace core principles from the earliest points of human existence.

1st, returning to Ubuntu—I am because we are, and because we are, I am.

One scholar, Ogude, speaks of Ubuntu as “rooted in ... a relational form of personhood” “believing the common bonds within a group are more important than any individual arguments and divisions.” In practice, it is “building a consensus around what affects the community. And ... [having] understood what is best for the community,” embracing and working for it together. Ubuntu “extends to our relationships with the non-human world of rivers, plants and animals” (Ogude). This practice means being intentional about what and how we communicate. For to communicate is to relate, to create bonds with burdens and benefits.

We also learn to express community from the seven principles of Ma’at, the ancient Kemetic (or Egyptian) society’s system of laws, named for the goddess who symbolizes highest morality. Major principles of Ma’at are Truth, Justice, Harmony, Balance, Order, Reciprocity and Propriety (Lee). In these principles we find the essence of aspirations and boundaries to form, advance, and express community. DC is at once local, regional, national and international; a sense of community can be elusive. Still, we rise by lifting up what makes life vibrant in this place—knowing it to be the Douglass Commonwealth, the 51st state—as we seek to decolonize our nation’s capital.

By finding our voices and giving voice to harmony, balance, and order, we can be complete. In these times, I invite our attention to sages (such as Malidoma Patrice Some and Sonbonfu Some), who’ve opened our eyes to the essential task of mourning together. The endless pattern of violence against Black, Brown and other global majority people is ongoing “shock and awe” that tries to rob us of the power of community. Most recently in DC we have yet to hear prominent voices in the establishment express concern about a Black man, **An’Twan Gilmore**, being executed by police while sleeping in his car. News coverage was so fleeting that it slipped from consciousness within weeks, at best becoming a name between commas on a list far too long. When we do not fully process our loss, we have little room to understand how every principle of a moral society is being undermined. When we are in denial and disbelief about such deep violation of what binds us together, we cannot be present to life and the business of living.

To be our truest, highest, and best—we must heal collectively; while seeking truth, justice, propriety and reciprocity. May the spirit of Ma’at guide us.

4. Community-Building Is Learning, Decolonizing, Power-shifting

Transformation engages us fully—whole hearts, mind-body-spirit—in decolonizing ourselves and the formations in our lives. We refuse all ideas and actions that attempt to dehumanize, sprouting from concepts such as “manifest destiny”—the notion that by divine intent whiteness should dominate places, people, culture, economy, all life.

Transformation is grounded in intersectionality, inspired by the Combahee River Collective, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis, Barbara Ransby, Kimberlé Crenshaw and more. It is alive in Cara Page, the Kindred Healing Justice Collective, and many bold spirits rooted in Black feminist / Southern Black radical traditions of the US and

global south; in offerings such as Emotional Emancipation Circles (a model from the Association of Black Psychologists and Community Healing Network) including those led in DC by Erika Totten; and works in progress by Aaron Goggans, Sandra Kim and others with the formation of Wild Seed Society. Through these models we know what it means to express and build community in the 21st century and for seven generations.

Transforming as community means we never banish ourselves to spectator roles, rather we keep cultivating change at every level of system (from inner/individual to interpersonal to institutional/structural).

So, we must ask:

- How are we learning and walking in ways that uproot settler colonialism?
- How are we shifting away from domination and towards liberation?
- How are we acknowledging harm experienced from our own and others' complicity in lethal substitutes for true community?
- What are we personally and collectively doing to heal?
- What reparations are we making?
- What structures are we questioning and re-creating?

Two examples of how expressing community can be transformative relate to:

Place-based philanthropy with a radical edge

DC is a study in contrasts. A place where Black elected officials and business and professional figures have a great deal of formal power, yet simply “breathing while Black” is often deadly. We are #1 in the nation in gentrification, specifically displacement of Black residents. #1 in the nation in Black maternal mortality. Here in DC, **Diverse City Fund** (of which I’m a co-founder) is at this moment celebrating its 10th anniversary, a decade of having grant decisions made by community residents, all Black/Indigenous/People of Color—better known as the global majority—who are involved bringing about justice. Recently, our first impact and assessment report (diversecity-fund.org) generated shared insight. It offered narratives that bind us together, raise our visibility, and enhance sustainability.

Thanks to the writing of this report, we know that across roles, our community’s stakeholders expressed:

1. A strong connection and appreciation for . . . redistribution of wealth and power towards community-led social and racial justice work in . . . DC.
2. A sense of trust in the DC Fund and its . . . transparency and accessibility . . . in its grantmaking . . . [and] equitable practices in . . . internal decision-making.
3. A belief that DC Fund is playing a vital and important role in both the activist and philanthropic communities.
4. A sense of gratitude because participating in or partnering with the DC Fund helps them pursue . . . personal goals of creating a more equitable city.

We found that our main impact was: “Creating a community, networking and learning space for social justice organizations, leadership, partners, and other funders.”

This narrative also helped us name 3 themes to create a path forward.

1. Strengthening Communication Loops
2. Making Shared Decisions in the organization
3. Diversifying Funding & Grantee Support

and setting a gift acceptance policy that reflects the organization’s values

These insights guide us forward. An example is making a commitment to expand the pool of community folks who serve on our grantmaking teams with shared political analysis that they draw from lived experience . . . especially east of the Anacostia River. And we are looking to create a communications hub for local social justice groups.

As we build community in one space, we create the conditions for broader community:

During this pandemic, DC Fund was a co-convenor in the formation of **Resourcing Radical Justice**, a group of DC-MD-VA (or “DMV”) funders who center Black liberation as the key to a thriving region. Examples of our work include a survey documenting experiences of global majority people in local philanthropy that motivated us to hold a healing retreat with storytelling and original creative works (visual art* and spoken word that we commissioned (Resourcing Radical Justice). We then held three learning sessions on harm, repair and accountability; followed by small group conversations and a retreat on reimagining philanthropy. We’ve had intense learning experiences from dialogue and collaboration—especially weaving narratives together—that build our resilience and resolve. Another world is possible.

These forays into transforming philanthropy draw from experiences—mine and those of folks who’ve occupied different places in the system, all pointing toward a power shift. We look to a rich knowledge base with written work to open minds and hearts, such as

- *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* by Incite!
- *Decolonizing Wealth*, by Edgar Villaneuva
- *Operationalizing Racial Equity*, by Maggie Potapchuk

And a forthcoming book by Yanique Redwood, who is transitioning from President and CEO of A Foundation for Radical Possibility (<https://www.iffdn.org>) to Executive Director of the Center for Anti-Racist Research.

Consciousness and community-making require understanding what’s real. Communication offers that reality check.

5. Communication is Community-Building

From the amazing spaces that this conference stitches together, the invitation is to communicate—to write and express—what contributes to a richer sense of our interconnectedness, and commitment to honor it *by any means necessary*. One means is the word—not to be worshiped, rather treated as part of a multi-hued palette to paint a world. Our focus must be on reorienting, resisting, reimagining.

We express and transform community when we join in community radio—including Pacifica’s WPFW in DC, WBAI in NY. We define and take our place in community with campaigns such as #Don’t Mute DC that boldly proclaim the importance of keeping DC culture in the sounds and sights on our streets.

I implore you to keep your reading expansive. Added to the illuminating work of so many gathered here, writers that fire my passion for community include:

- **Robin D. G. Kelley**, *Freedom Dreams* (“The idea of a revolution of the mind has always been central to . . . black conceptions of liberation . . . an unleashing of the mind’s most creative capacities, catalyzed by participation in struggle for change.” p. 191)
- **Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor**, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Liberation* (“Solidarity is standing in unity with people even when you have not personally experienced their particular oppression.” p. 215)
- **Angela Davis**, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (“The personal is political. There is a deep relationality that links struggles against institutions and struggles to reinvent our personal lives and recraft ourselves.” p. 108)
- **Paul Ortiz**, *An African American and Latinx History of the United States* (“If American history serves as a guide, not even the president of the United States can stem the tide of grassroots freedom movements and the ability of people throughout the hemisphere to draw inspiration from each other’s struggles . . . the self-activity of the most oppressed is the key to liberty. . .” p. 184)
- **Mariame Kaba**, *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (“We want to invite a broader and deeper conception of justice . . . one rooted in reparations, modeled on Chicago’s . . . The reparations framework outlines five elements—repair, restoration, acknowledgement, cessation, and nonrepetition.” p. 66)
- **Resma Menakem**, *My Grandmother’s Hands* (audio excerpt at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hANctQbhly4>)
- **angel kyodo williams**, *Radical Dharma*
- **Sara Trembath**, *This Past Was Waiting for Me* (“ . . . teaching the truth . . . academically and then societally and psychologically, what must result . . . is a new American Story and with it a firmer foundation for equality and peace and healing to manifest.” p. 95)
- **Mindy Fullilove**, *Root Shock* and *Urban Alchemy*

- **Chris Myers Asch & George Derek Musgrove**, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital*
- **Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Makani Themba, N'Tanya Lee**, and more . . .

6. *Moving in this moment . . .*

May we all be guided by the words of adrienne maree brown *(from *Emergent Strategy* p.55):

“I am living a life I don't regret
A life that will resonate with my ancestors,
And with as many generations forward as I can imagine.
I am attending to the crises of my time with my best self,
I am of communities that are doing our collective best
To honor our ancestors and all humans to come.”

This is our invitation, our point of possibility: To be about repair, reimagining, about writing/wording our way to community, which is to say liberation.

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Author Bio

Brigette Rouson, J.D., M.A., (she/her/li/ella), principal of Rouson Associates, brings more than 30 years’ experience advancing nonprofit effectiveness toward a just society. She works with the RoadMap consulting network, is a co-founder and board member of Diverse City Fund, and part of local funders’ collective Resourcing Radical Justice. Brigette focuses on internal transformation, emphasizing racial justice and intersectionality, toward sustainable change in ourselves, practices, and policies. Brigette has supported 250+ groups to innovate. She is involved in local organizing and activism, including faith-based and woman-centered initiatives.

Brigette is a graduate of Howard University (B.A.), Georgetown University (J.D.), and University of Pennsylvania (M.A.) where she completed all coursework toward a Ph.D. in communications and culture.