

How We See Free

***Debbie Allen, Susann Moeller, Chuck Salmons,
Rikki Santer, and Karen Scott***

Reflection

Throughout 2024, the Ohio Poetry Association and Poets Against Racism & Hate USA (organizations for which we serve as leaders) presented the Ohio Underground Railroad Whistle-Stop Poetry Tour. This series of events honored Ohio's role in the Underground Railroad and raised awareness of issues of social injustice, hate, and prejudice past and present. At historically important sites such as homes that were Underground Railroad stations and a church founded on abolitionist principles, the tour's poets enlightened and inspired audiences. They read and performed works of witness by historic poets and their own poems conceived from lived experiences and intense interest in allyship.

The events included poetry readings and workshops, history talks, musical and interpretive performances, walking tours, and other programming. Central to the tour was a traveling collaborative writing project. At each tour stop, attendees—adults and children alike—responded in writing to the question “What does freedom mean to you?” This endeavor helped participants tap their feelings and thoughts about the subject matter, and the group writing experience created a sense of communal belonging. Event attendees walked away pledging to “be more aware,” “gain more knowledge,” and “speak out more” about social justice issues. As well, they left behind pieces of themselves that would be assembled into a multivoiced view of freedom. The poem “How We See Free” emerged from the more than 100 responses to our question.

We composed “How We See Free” as a contrapuntal comprising three poems in vertical columns that form a fourth poem when read horizontally. In developing the poem, we compiled and arranged participants' responses using their exact words. To achieve effective flow and other artistic qualities, we made minor adjustments to verb tense, pronouns, and so forth and separated or slightly rearranged parts of certain entries. After its creation, the poem was formatted and printed as an 11 × 17-inch broadside [shown on next page]. We chose the contrapuntal form because it allowed for the meaningful juxtaposition of the many contributions to the poem's development. Furthermore, the complexity and interwoven nature of the form helps represent the complex interweaving of perspectives on freedom.

The Ohio Underground Railroad Whistle-Stop Poetry Tour culminated in a Capstone Celebration in Columbus, Ohio's capital. At the Capstone Celebration, we gifted the “How We See Free” broadside to attendees and concluded the event with a four-part reading of the poem. It is our hope that the multitude of voices represented in the poem will resonate with varied audiences and that their unified call for justice and fairness will reverberate far and wide.

How We See Free

a collaborative contrapuntal

justice joy fairness faith paradise peace happiness love	liberty, access, agency	justice joy fairness faith paradise peace happiness love
we wake without fear of the coming day we rise from the bed and breathe fresh air	river us to healing, river us to peace stones flowing between our fingers freedom's winds in all our lungs river us colorful understanding	—no matter skin color, gender, body condition, race— liberating our thoughts and behaviors
we walk the street knowing no harm will come	freedom is a small notion that lives between butterfly wings forever moving where it wants creating hurricanes from its battered flight	from societal pressures and others' expectations from the chains of their opinions, their actions
unhindered, safe, no longer slaved desirous of the power to actually live not just permission to survive we are still whole despite what they took	justice joy fairness faith paradise peace happiness love	breathing deeply, knowing we exist charting our own destinies
being our genuine selves, our best selves absent fear of persecution or physical harm	encouraged to be different, celebrated for it telling our truth to help others tell theirs	when even in our coming, even in our going through darkened tunnel or down lighted path —desired path, that constant path to being— opportunities abound differences our greatest gift
all people living their dreams because no one is free until all are free	judgment erased and if we do not know righteousness then maybe we are not free	all lives held in love, love overcoming each given a chance same as the other
freedom is taking responsibility	freedom is the free will God gave us to choose Him God's grace and mercy freedom flows through us—a river— a struggle for justice, not an advanced state of being meaning	freedom is inexorable, aspirational, continual
not having our actions held against us realizing support in our communities speaking to those who are listening speaking words of truth	reasonable laws, the end of war, space to feel safe equity for all and the abolishment of ignorance acknowledgment of our past to make way for our future a reminder to our leaders that they serve us all ours is a democratic process	
we choose our religions learn our country's true history	we can walk with God, we can fight the good fight think & create without censure have the right to choose a life peaceful & tranquil with loved ones & friends pursue our dreams with encouragement	life without anxiety without slavery refrain from enchantment love without fear
we choose our actions	eat read play say believe question have do be without retribution	
go anywhere (unworried where we go)		
justice joy fairness faith paradise peace happiness love		justice joy fairness faith paradise peace happiness love
independence and choice ability to accept or refuse, ability to hope	grow and change and sing unfazed by the world knowing that who we are, what circumstances we're born into will not impact our pursuit of happiness freedom is democracy freedom is a generous place	choice in obligations, choice to be hope for our future
breathing deeply, breathing easy, sleeping safe	all the colors of the mind mixing well humanity entwined	the right and opportunity to STAND UP all holding hands in a public place



Throughout 2024, the Ohio Poetry Association and Poets Against Racism & Hate USA presented the Ohio Underground Railroad Whistle-Stop Poetry Tour, a series of readings that honored Ohio's role in the Underground Railroad and raised awareness of issues of social injustice, hate, and prejudice that persist today. At stops on the tour, community members answered the question "What does freedom mean to you?" This collaborative contrapuntal emerged from the more than 100 responses to that question. It comprises three poems set side by side and one poem read left to right. The contrapuntal form allows for the meaningful juxtaposition of the many contributions to the poem's development, and the complexity and interwoven nature of the form helps represent the complex interweaving of perspectives on freedom.

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How We See Free

[1]

justice joy fairness faith paradise peace happiness love

we wake without fear of the coming day
we rise from the bed and breathe fresh air

we walk the street knowing no harm will come
unhindered, safe, no longer slaved
desirous of the power to actually live
not just permission to survive
we are still whole despite what they took

being our genuine selves, our best selves
absent fear of persecution or physical harm

all people living their dreams
because no one is free until all are free

freedom is taking responsibility
not having our actions held against us
realizing support in our communities
speaking to those who are listening
speaking words of truth

we choose our religions
learn our country's true history
we choose our actions
go anywhere (unworried where we go)

justice joy fairness faith paradise peace happiness love

independence and choice
ability to accept or refuse, ability to hope

breathing deeply, breathing easy, sleeping safe

[2]

liberty, access, agency

river us to healing, river us to peace

stones flowing between our fingers
freedom's winds in all our lungs
river us colorful understanding

freedom is a small notion that lives between
butterfly wings forever moving where it wants
creating hurricanes from its battered flight

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encouraged to be different, celebrated for it
telling our truth to help others tell theirs
speaking up/speaking out for our own/for others

judgment erased

and if we do not know righteousness
then maybe we are not free

freedom is the free will God gave us to choose Him
God's grace and mercy

freedom flows through us—a river—
a struggle for justice, not an advanced state of being

meaning

we can walk with God, we can fight the good fight
think & create without censure
have the right to choose
a life peaceful & tranquil with loved ones & friends
pursue our dreams with encouragement

eat read play say believe question have do be
without retribution

grow and change and sing
unfazed by the world knowing
that who we are, what circumstances we're born into
will not impact our pursuit of happiness

freedom is democracy
freedom is a generous place

all the colors
of the mind
mixing well
humanity entwined

[3]

justice joy fairness faith paradise peace happiness love

—no matter skin color, gender, body condition, race—
liberating our thoughts and behaviors
from societal pressures and others' expectations
from the chains of their opinions, their actions

breathing deeply, knowing we exist
charting our own destinies

when even in our coming, even in our going
through darkened tunnel or down lighted path
—desired path, that constant path to being—
opportunities abound
differences our greatest gift

all lives held in love, love overcoming
each given a chance same as the other

freedom is inexorable, aspirational, continual
reasonable laws, the end of war, space to feel safe
equity for all and the abolishment of ignorance
acknowledgment of our past to make way for our future
a reminder to our leaders that they serve us all
ours is a democratic process

life without anxiety
without slavery
refrain from enchainment
love without fear

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choice in obligations, choice to be
hope for our future

the right and opportunity to STAND UP
all
holding hands in a public place

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holding hands in a public place

all the colors
of the mind
mixing well
humanity entwined

Author Bios

Debbie Allen is a cofounder of Poets Against Racism & Hate USA. A Pushcart Prize nominee, she has performed internationally, and her poetry has appeared in various journals and collections. She has served as an associate poetry editor for *Poets Reading the News*, a committee chair for the Ohio Poetry Association, and a board member for The Watershed Journal Literary Group. Debbie is committed to combating systemic inequities, with much of her poetry tending toward response to injustices. She practices her craft on land originally inhabited by Myaamiaki and Bodéwadmik.

Dr. Susann Moeller, vice-president of the Ohio Poetry Association and vice-chancellor of the National Federation of State Poetry Societies, is an award-winning bilingual poet and editor of the eco-poetry anthologies *Open Earth I, II, and III*. She loves to write in the “plotting shed” of her garden turned urban wildlife sanctuary, dances in random places, and believes in the inseparable nature of art and the environment. She promotes poetry as a vehicle for social justice activism and as a genre that enriches every type of experience and vice versa.

Chuck Salmons has received an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award for poetry and served as a leader for the Ohio Poetry Association. His poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Chiron Review*, *Pudding Magazine*, *The Fib Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Main Street Rag*, and *I Thought I Heard a Cardinal Sing: Ohio's Appalachian Voices*. He has published three poetry collections: *Stargazer Suite* (11th Hour Press), *Patch Job* (Night-Ballet Press), and *The Grace of Gazing Inward: Poems in Response to the Art of Alice Carpenter* (Dos Madres Press). Chuck performs with the poetry trio Concrete Wink.

Rikki Santer's poetry has been published widely, and she has received many honors, including several Pushcart and Ohioana book award nominations and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. In 2023, Rikki was named Ohio Poet of the Year. She is a member of the teaching artist roster of the Ohio Arts Council and a past vice-president of the Ohio Poetry Association. Her collection *Resurrection Letter* was grand prize short-listed for the Eric Hoffer Book Award, and her forthcoming collection, *Shepherd's Hour*, won the Paul Nemser Book Prize from Lily Poetry Review Books.

Karen Scott is a poet living in Columbus, Ohio. She is a member/supporter of the Ohio Poetry Association and Poets Against Racism & Hate USA, a past participant in the Women of Appalachia Project, and a proud member of the SALON writing group. Her work has been published in several anthologies and reviews, an online “zine,” and an online publication and as a broadside. Karen has been a featured poet at several readings and regularly participates in reading at open mics—in person and online.