

VOICES FROM THE CULTURAL BATTLEFRONT: ORGANIZING FOR EQUITY

“ETHICS”

After Dudley Cocke presents the economic analysis at our New Orleans gathering in December 2007, a conversation about ethics ensues:

DENEE MCLOUD: What about everyday people who passively participate in hyper-capitalism?

VICKI MEEK: Well the truth is that we want the cheap t-shirt.

DENEE MCLOUD: Though I'm actively trying to work against it, I'm actively benefiting every day. How am I a part of the cause? I might not be a dictator, but I'm living a lifestyle in this world that many people will never live. And I'm just an arts worker in Seattle, but I'm completely and utterly privileged. I'm just as guilty. I'm willing to acknowledge that I benefit from it, even if I'm struggling to fight against it.

KALAMU YA SALAAM: If you were working in the kitchen in the big house, how would you define slavery? You're talking about privilege. Privilege does not necessarily eradicate your status.

DENEE MCLOUD: No, but I'm not saying that. I'm saying for some people who have privilege –

KALAMU YA SALAAM: Well let's not talk about some, let's talk about us: how do we define slavery if we're working in the kitchen?

VICKI MEEK: You still don't have the freedom to go and do whatever the hell you want cause you're working in the kitchen, but you're still –

DENEE MCLOUD: But I know I have a voice unlike my friends who live in South Africa. My voice is different when I'm there visiting them.

KALAMU YA SALAAM: I understand. But the real question is not your position on whether you have privilege, the real question is what are you doing with that privilege? We didn't ask to be born in whatever way we were born, this is a manifestation. But we can choose what we do with the resources that are available to us. So if you're working in the kitchen, and it's been a good three months since you threw some food out the window, there's something wrong. That's all I'm saying. I'm not saying you should go spit in the master's face and give up your job in the kitchen. I'm just saying you had access to some resources, what did you do with it? I think our conscience whips us when we realize we aint doing shit.

CARLTON TURNER: And as brother Christopher said yesterday, how do we turn this theoretical conversation into a verb? How do we imbed the economic analysis into our lives to work against it? And not in silos, but collectively, so that it has a larger impact.

VICKI MEEK: The thing that the so-called neo-cons learned, which was something that the so-called liberals initiated, was organization. We have lost organization, and that's where we began to fall short. The whole notion of globalization can make your head hurt. But if you're organized and you've got a real strategy for that organization: not just connecting to each other, but a strategy for why you're connected to each other, then many things are possible. *We can do it, because we've done it.* It's not a new concept, but it's one we've forgot. And that's where we failed the youth.

CAROLYN MORRIS: How are elder emerging cultural activists preparing youth to take the lead on the battlefield of the cultural arts movement for the future? That's something I battle with because I'm a parent of three teenagers. I try to push what I can push at home, but I know when they get out in the world that art looks very different, and connecting to the values that I instill at home becomes very difficult. I'm interested in hearing about this topic from the perspective of a parent, as well as the Executive Director of a 32 year old organization, Alternate Roots, that has purposefully shifted to be inter-generational.

NICK SLIE: It's one thing to bring people into the fold symbolically and have people on your staff that are young people. But a lot of times these founder-driven organizations, these people who had real vision to start an organization in the first place, these people keep the power. If it's really going to be an experience of bringing the younger people along, we need shared power.

VICKI MEEK: So much of that is I'm sure you've figured it out, is insecurity. A person who is insecure isn't going to feel secure enough to share power with anybody, much less to you. That's another issue that we have to struggle with. My son used to say to me (he's 25 now), I hear all this conversation about my generation, the hip hop generation is this that and the other, he said, but somebody raised us. You can't blame us for whatever y'all did to us, or didn't do for us. We have to learn the lesson that our parents had a hard time learning which is: the next generation has go to be the next generation. It can't be the next group of people who are going to follow us to the grave. But I do feel that you hit the nail on the head in terms of understanding that leadership does not become leadership if you don't let them lead. And you can't lead by following.

DUDLEY COCKE: Getting with this idea of organizing, I've been at this for over thirty years, and started or have been part of starting several organizations, including Alternate Roots. Of the different ones, Alternate Roots is the most vital of the three or four I was in on starting. I think it's because there's this transition to leadership going on. This actual meeting began as an organization, a global network for cultural equity. What I found more than once is there are a lot of people who want the cream of the organization and the organizing, but there are very few people who want to really make the commitment. This organization, the global network for cultural equity, it had a large membership, global, but there were only about six people who were going to go out and raise the money, or who were going to put in the extra hours, there was just a lot of skimming. The commitment was just skin deep. A lot of people want to enjoy what they think is a good life, so they're using the art to get into the good life. That's more of their goal, rather than trying to affect justice. It's about their own career, their individual expression. That's one of the challenges of this organizing: really getting a group and finding a dynamic where you can deepen each others commitment and hold each other accountable. We've got to be able to

talk to each other frankly knowing that we all care about the same things and we're trying to get to the same place. So while I'm really for this organizing, I've seen a lot of organization fall apart because there's not a depth of commitment and not enough ethics. That's what it has come to: not enough ethics. One coalition I started, there was a huge ethical issue, and three quarters of the membership didn't pay any attention to it, and the other quarter left the organization.

ABEL LOPEZ: It is the issue of personal accountability. At the point of organizing at the national and international level, if you're not involved locally, within your own organization and within your own community, it's going to be very difficult to motivate people to be involved in a national level because you're not accountable to your own space and your own community. Whether they're the founder or a more recent leader, many of those individuals were people who were self-motivated because they saw a need in their community. It was not about attaining a leadership position. They weren't thinking about leadership, but they were being leaders by the mere fact that they took an action. If we continue to look at leadership as being an attainment of status, we're deluding ourselves into thinking that we're actually interested in leadership or change. It goes to the fundamental question of how accountable are we to ourselves, to the people who are next to us, and the people who are around us and live with us, and how do we then by extension, if we're involved with organizations, use our organization to promote that personal ethic? There's a lot of information about what's going on in the world that is easily accessible now. But what do we do with that information? Do we seek it out or do we live in the comfort the space where it's not near me and it doesn't affect me. But as the conversation was framed, in a global situation it does affect me. As simple and as fundamental as it sounds, the question is: how accountable am I willing to be for my life? Regarding the issue of leadership, if we strip away the thing about trying to reach a status position, leadership can be exhibited and demonstrated in any position you have in an organization. If you're at an organization and the organization has lost sight of why it's in that community, it's fruitless. Why would you want to become a leader of an organization that has no relevance or pertinence in the community? The ethical point is: how do I demonstrate my commitment and my ethic and my idea of what's just and right. Right is not about having the latest information, it's a moral question. Is it right for the people in this community to have been subject to the experience that they have been for the last few years? The answer would be no, period. What do we do about it? How do we sustain these organizations that are doing it? What is the catastrophe in my own community that does not have the proportions of Hurricane Katrina, but nevertheless have the impact in my community? If I can't see that, why do I want to lead an organization? I can't become so obsessed with the success of my organization rather than the impact of the work.

RHODESSA JONES: It is a new world order, on the darker *and* the lighter side. What are we going to do in this new world order? It calls for another kind of methodology for organizing. I created something 15 years ago because I was hired as an aerobics teacher in a jail full of women and I thought something else was going to be required other than aerobics for these women. I did it, because I was sent. I couldn't plan. But I was wondering, how can I make an impact with women in a jail when the numbers were saying in America that more and more African American women are going to jail more than ever before, and largely, more women were going to jail than ever before. For me, as somebody's mother and grandmother, it was about, what's happening to children? If we're not going to speak to these sisters who are coming into jail, mad as hell, because everything that we were promised as women has fallen through. He may ride in,

but not on a white horse, maybe on a bag of white horse. It's about all of us getting busy. I tell them, you've gotta take everybody down because when you go to court there's no mercy, they don't like bad girls. Back to young people, in jail, right now I work with people who are 17 and 18. Young people, particularly young women, don't want to hear from me. I battle with young people 24/7 to get them to shut up, sit down, and listen to me. In my organization when they get out of jail, I trust them with things. More than half the time they don't get back, they smoke the joint, they run into home girl, tell me, oh Miss Jones, you know how it is, you were young once. No! You want me to bequeath my company to you? How am I supposed to work with you? You've got to step up to me. Not that I'm trying to be a big willy. I am all that, I've done all that work. But I want somebody to come on and relieve me of this burden. But it calls for mindless, thankless work. When I began with The Medea Project 15 years ago it was just an idea because there was no one else to do it. I didn't have any money. Now let's fast forward to USA Fellow, which is this thing I just got a few weeks ago. It's \$50,000 because of my work. One, all my company is saying, we don't have to raise no money now because you've got the money, right? Secondly, all the funders are calling me privately saying, Rhodessa, this is your money now, don't share this with the company, this is about you, about you buying yourself some future, some time. I'll be 60 next year, I'm tired. At the same time, I would feel really weird to sit on this money if it called for the company needing something and the money wasn't going to come for funders, I've gotta spend some of it. My point is, what we're saying about transparency and integrity is so true. Why do we do what we do? And at the same time, we live in a world that's so stressful, I get tired, I get hot flashes, at the end of the day at the jails creating a workshop, and then being called in because so-and-so got busted again and this one got shot or this girl's been found dead. This is the work, this is the world that I made. Or this woman's child is being abused by the father, I've gotta go to court to be a witness, it's like the new world order is encroaching on all of us. I have some young people in my organization who are cool. But they have their own lives and they are young. Sometimes they just don't want to be brought down. (Impersonating): "Do I have to go to court with you now? Do I have to go to court with you today? That bitch deserves it, sorry Miss Jones." As we talk, we have to realize that a new methodology for how we can really work and make something happen as we move forward because organization now is so different; with the information highway, it's a good thing but it's very flippant. I get too much info about everything and about everything. At the same time, how do we distill it down and work in such a way that we can make a difference as this cultural organizational group, individually and collectively? It's a new world.