

## A Text as a Bridge — for You, You and You

By Gwylene Gallimard and Hope Clark

Our goal has been to develop a year-long CONVERSATION around five principles of community engagement as they relate to power, dialogue, partnership, aesthetics and individual/community transformation. We also wish to capture this work in a text that may be a bridge for you, you and you; for example you the academic, you the artist, the community person and everyone in between, but really who is our audience in this dialogue?

**Comment:** Should this be a separate question? Should you use section titles or section topics: intro, methodological approach, etc.

**Comment:** I agree with the five principles, they serve as a very strong template, my first thought is how those principles were mined to unearth them as practice, and are there not situations, communities and dynamics around that are relative to each locale that might be cause for adaptation? What methods of evaluation and follow-up constitute whether the principles were practiced? Considering the wide range of dialogue and interpretations around aesthetics, how does one leave room for evaluation and definition of aesthetics if how one identifies affects their position on the principle? I was an academic. I functioned in that system and found it highly theoretical and “think-tanky.” However, I couldn't sustain the lack of application, and the academic experience has highly affected the way I identify myself even in terms of race. I was black, now I'm a New Yorker, yet I don't consider myself American. The lens through which I viewed those principles has been altered by the process of identifying myself as this or that.

We know our commissioners: a Masters Program in Community Arts at MICA and an Arts Service Organization of the South (Alternate ROOTS). Then our audience, the readers of the text, may be mainly students, teachers, Resources for Social Change (RSC) [\[1\]](#) participants and leaders of community arts or community-based arts. The RSC Learning Exchanges that explore ideas and techniques to create social change through the arts involve cultural workers of various walks of life and develop partnerships between artists and communities, artists-educators-activists-others. However, in including the voices of communities — and especially the voices of the ones who do not know they are called/classified as communities' voices or may not want to be called that way — we want to make sure they are not just quoted, since they/you are a targeted audience as well. When it comes to a record of sharing what we are doing, the way we write, choose stories, apply references and reflect history(ies), is generally geared — consciously or not — to a specific audience, and at the same time it acts as a mirror for that audience. In attempting to generate a complicated net of tongues and ears, we may get lost, dissent creatively, be overwhelmed by the action at the expense of clarity. As you will see, we often go beyond dualism,



**Brittany Rumsey and Hope Clark, participants in the year long conversation of five principles of engagement in Alternate ROOTS' program for learning, Resources for Social Change.**

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**Comment:** We diminish boundaries and move beyond binaries...

(black-white, rich-poor, artist-community, academy-community), to include the work of time and multiple identities in generating our dialogues. Therefore in this description of events, we research a poetic cloud — *I ain't no poet* — speech practices — *I ain't no public speaker* — analysis — *I ain't no academic* ...

**Comment:** I do not believe it is the intention, but this “ain't” a read to like a jab/quote of a particular class of people and possibly the vernacula. As one who emcees and lives with words, this “poetic cloud” and use of “ain'ts” sticks to my eyes for some reason, and especially because I am none of the above as well, yet I overlap into the titles by my chosen trade.

We are artists who are practicing the collaborative process to highlight social assets and issues with combinations of reflections and actions. We may also show our discomfort in the social and political establishment. We don't know how many people will be involved in these ongoing dialogues and how transformative the process will be.

**Comment:** Is there room for ... other. For folks still finding their way who may not i.d. themselves as artists, academics, race etc.

RSC Learning Exchanges are built around activities influenced by art practices, mainly theater research.

**Comment:** Really? Where do the practices come from? “everyday” performance, theater of the oppressed, ethnographic practices, black arts movement, “rehearsal for the revolution” etc.

The activity is explained, and then modeled by the facilitators. Activities are meant to make participants understand the five principles of community engagement developed by the Alternate ROOTS RSC workgroup. Participants may be experienced or not in facilitation and art practice. Some art practices are fun. But the fun

**Comment:** Is there space to talk about “art for action” vs. “art for art sake” functional art that builds dialogue and methods ...

may only be a resource for social change if the “why of the game” — how it is related to or how it can be part of art/community work, a sociopolitical engagement in the arts — is critically expressed and analyzed. If we make art about an issue but fail to critically look at how it applies to our lives, then it may be like advertising a piece of clothing as being “sustainable” with pretty pictures of happy people working, having the aesthetic appearance of being socially just, but not engaged in a movement that is transparent or transforms the issue.

**Comment:** What about the cathartic nature of process sometimes? I have worked with people and even myself in my formative years as an artist who didn't understand the why or how of art they created. The notion or possibility that an emotion could be channeled was the transformation in and of itself. All this with no critical analysis. And the art is sometimes about a social justice issue as well.

It takes more steps than simply making something about the topic of social justice, for something to have a relationship with the socially just in life. Here lies the difference between a Social Service,

**Comment:** Why caps?

which provides art as a way to air perceptions, and Social Change

**Comment:** Why caps?

where artists are supported to engage in a community to work towards conscious goals that affect choices about the way people are treated. Art in this capitalist society

**Comment:** Loaded statement. Can you break this down a bit more? Commodity/ “banking method,” alternative ways of looking at “value” “worth” “communal/community” knowledge and etc. This needs a paragraph.

has developed within the free enterprise of creativity, acting as a moneymaking business, entertainment and/or social service, or a way to appease people’s emotions, but art for social justice has a different mission.

**Comment:** This speaks to the aforementioned comment. I worked in an academic community where self-expression was social justice on several levels. The facilitator myself galvanized my peers of European and African American female ancestry against me because I had stepped out of a comfortable box of uncharismatic and anti-intelligent behavior and substantively engaged students. I can only confirm such because these fears were conveyed to me by peers and supervisory staff alike. It didn’t pave the way for more Black male teachers to be in the field in that place but it showed the discomfort level people had even when it was an oxymoron to fight a teacher for teaching. I guess that was more like social injustice. The more important element of that situation was that the mere opportunity to practice and find one’s voice artistically or channel pain for young people transformed a community and there was no critical analysis of why it happened other than me being profiled and fired. Some of the young people addressed some very heavy issues artistically, had no sustained infrastructure to cope but immersed themselves unwittingly in the creative process. That moment in time easily encompassed entertainment, social service and emotional appeasement so I wonder what makes your view of social justice not those things? What working models do people consider art and social justice since 2000, let’s say graffiti?

#### **State of the Nation V — Tipping Point, New Orleans, La., March 18-22, 2009**

**Comment:** I would call this section  
Transparent Methodology(ies): A Grassroots  
Approach.

We are at the State of the Nation V in New Orleans.<sup>[2]</sup>  
We are viewers, questioners, documenters, ... actors?  
Being inclusive, playful, true to the principles, media-oriented ... those attitudes are on our minds. And we may have been profiled quickly! We are two white women, one with a northern accent, one with a foreign accent. We are shaped by medium-level academic language acquisition, artistic experience (dance and contemporary visual arts) and our ways to survive in a capitalist society. How much immersion do we need in the communities we are visiting? At this point our goals for an ongoing dialogue are 1) to create something authentic in the process of inquiry, and 2) to discover a thread that leads the discussions toward a strong community-building process.



**Edward Buckner and Troy Jones, participants in the year long conversation of five principles of engagement in Alternate ROOTS’ program for learning, Resources for Social Change.**

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**Comment:** We know who you are...where are you? What is the “space” you are in? Who lives there? Create the sociopolitical landscape you referred to earlier in the paper.

We decide to plan multiple conversations between two people, as opposed to interview people one by one. We record in video these conversations and are regarded more as technicians than journalists. This process was developed by the Charleston Rhizome<sup>[3]</sup> of Alternate ROOTS after reaching a deep interest in the Social Forums and wanting to guarantee the arts an important role in "Another South is possible" (Durham - June 2006), "Another world is possible" (Nairobi-January 2007):

**Comment:** Does it make sense to speak a little bit about USSF, mission, goals, approaches and "Another US is possible" (Atlanta - June 2007)

*“Our video conversations are not a documentary of the Forums. Our ways of introducing strangers together in front of a non-invading camera is a tool maybe as powerful in some situations as a Story Circle. As a team of artists and non-artists we wanted to be actors in the forums, not only viewers and documenters. We feel a responsibility to make those conversations accessible to their authors who may come from many countries and all walks of life. We are also looking at how we are bringing home those conversations with a world much wider than a family, much wider than a block, a neighborhood, a school, a workplace, a city, the South or our country.”<sup>[4]</sup>*

In New Orleans, we created a series of questions that we printed on a set of cards. For each conversation, participants pick one or more cards from our hands and use the content as talking points. The questions were suggested to us by the RSC principles. Some examples:

- *Do you feel as if you have power?*
- *Do you feel your culture is respected? How? How not?*
- *Are you looking for partnership? Could we partner together?*
- *If I say art, what do you say? If I say aesthetics, what do you say?*
- *Social Justice through the arts, what does that mean?*
- *Are you looking for transformation in your community? If so, what kind?*

They may also be about identity:

- *How do you identify; as a community member? an artist? or an academic? or some combination of them? Can you explain?*

Other questions are locally anchored:

- *Do you see cultural cleansing in New Orleans?*

Here are some extracts of what we are hearing:

- *I just became an academic but I am acting as an artist in a community.*
- *I am an activist. Where does that fit in that list?*
- *I was an artist, but after Katrina and my first baby ... I feel I am becoming more a community member. (And that last conversation was mostly about teaching.)*

Is it necessary to separate the three roles of being an artist, a community member, and an academic? Part of the process of using the RSC principles is to make attempts to name ourselves. The RSC Learning Exchange wants to be a creative process as well as a process of critical analysis where creator, learner, teacher and inquirer are one. To separate roles with the identities/profiles that may be attached to them is to actually defy what the RSC principles are trying to achieve.

**Comment:** If someone names themselves a particular title, do they have the opportunity to define it, or do I bring my own definition to the word, not to project what that is onto the person's behavior? I often think of what the title is transmitting to people when they hear it or what do

people think it transmits when they speak it. Example, an academic to me before I started teaching was mostly a black PhD who wrote books about the black experience from an “authentic” perspective and mixed street jargon with rhetoric, vested black schools for a hefty price but offered no real infrastructure for moving oppressed folks forward. Before I majored in art at a school, I thought an artist was someone who said things that were said in an original form offering, or someone who offered a unique viewpoint through conventional forms. It’s kinda like saying “well I’m an intelligent black man,” which I would translate as someone meaning that most black men aren’t intelligent. Like some sort of measure up to the “dominant culture” thing. Then when I hear the word “dominant culture,” it’s all wordplay and power in the words, if some one is dominant, someone else has to be complicit and weak. To me the principles are a great opportunity to explore so many challenges in communities but I fear that the one-stop nature of these kinds of offerings also need to offer sustainability once facilitators leave.

Who engages, who designs and how a Learning Exchange is implemented is determined by the skills of the facilitators. We listen to needs. As community members we have needs; as creators we meet and very often highlight needs; and as listeners we inquire what the needs are. But first we want to discover assets. As community members, whoever we are, we have assets — knowledge and experience; as creators we use assets; and as listeners we inquire what the assets are. Is that right?

In conversation we may share our individual authenticity — or we may not. In collaboration, we hope to share our dreams and goals as authentic individuals. We are continually learning and clarifying our common goals as our individual authentic perceptions continually grow and change the depth of our collaboration. Exhausting? *“My friends are the people I work with.”*

In this work we, Hope and Gwylene, exchanged, organized and edited conversations. We set up conversations but we also wanted to have conversations about people’s conversations. We didn’t simply want to take people’s thoughts and control the way they are heard. To edit is to focus toward the essential but it is also to select out. And to be true with our search we wanted to challenge the process. During the State of the Nation Festival we recorded three-and-a-half hours of conversations and workshops and sent DVDs to all the participants. Since they allowed us to record them, we wanted them to be the first editors of their own voice and move on the journey with us, able to choose what they want to be published. But this is a short-term process. People rarely reach back to moments of exchange unless they have some investment in it. *You, the participants in the video conversations, have given us your consent for noncommercial use of the recordings.* However, we still want to understand the practice of shared power in the pursuit of learning. As an example, in developing this text we looked at the political ramifications of the RSC work; and the artistic angle of authentic and experimental representation and the nature of analytical inquiry.



**Kathy Randels and Edony Golden, participants in the yearlong conversation of five principles of engagement in Alternate ROOTS’ program for learning, Resources for Social Change.**

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There were two women who attended one of the workshops of the festival, both working in the juvenile prison system. Hope shared that she worked in a maximum-security prison for three years. It was clear they were very emotional, responding very sensitively to power structures they saw in the art they were witnessing being made in the workshop. Hope asked one of them if they might be interested in participating in the “Ongoing Dialogues” project. *“We have some questions and are recording people discussing some of them.”* The woman talked with Hope about her work, but also shared that her colleague would probably not want to participate in such a project, because of her perception of the nature of the process, seeing the dominant culture ALWAYS taking knowledge away.

IS THIS TEXT THE BIRTH OF A COLLECTIVE CONVERSATION? Is this text a conversation in progress? Some of what we heard: “Art? *Something not required*”; “Part of our nature that wants to be like the creator”; “Seen but not heard”; “Let the process be a bit messy”; “Aesthetics? What does that mean?”; “It all depends on whom I am dialoguing with.”; “Picking ideas in a hat and make them important.”; “In the Black community, we think that White people have power, but I think we are responsible for leaving it in their hands and not asserting ours.”; “Cultural cleansing in New Orleans? Yes, if we will need a permit to play music in the streets.”; “Activism? To keep me out of trouble.”; “Love of making money out of misery.”; “If you take the bands out of the street, they will be replaced by guns and drugs”; “All people love our music” ... [\[5\]](#)

Is community art community building? We keep finding ourselves striving to build and looking for a structure to build upon. We want to look at the difference between an experience, or a vision of a different world, and what it takes to build something that measures beyond the value of a product and moves into ethics, necessities and behavioral change.

**Bridging the Gap Between University & Community, South Carolina State University, Orangeburg, S.C., April 17-18, 2009**[\[6\]](#)

*“THERE IS SOMETHING MISSING”  
I’m confused. Is that a question or the answer?”*[\[7\]](#)

Our roles have changed. From documenters we have become co-leaders. Are we moving from being viewers to being actors? In the process we are considering the make-up of a community and go back to the traditional ways of approaching people with direct conversations and open interviews. South Carolina State University was the site of the Orangeburg Massacre in 1968. Silence and fear are part of the picture. We bring into the process two African-American artists/RSC facilitators in training/shadows, Shon Sims and Ebony Golden. “Who leads the team or organizes the work and who leads in public may not be — does not have to be — the same person ... as partnership starts to happen through the capability of a team to share responsibilities, but someone must make sure all the necessary tasks are completed.” The RSC community we represent is not often found on paper. A team is developing and exposing different concepts of leadership. We are leading and learning at the same time about: THE FORMING OF A TEAM, a group of collaborators. We are all artists as well as past or present educators, but all anchored on different grounds. Ms. Ali was brought into the team. She, a community member from Orangeburg, takes advantage of the opportunities offered to seniors that the University provides. She is the first foundation of the bridge on the community side. She is an elder, coming back from the North to her family’s land.

**Comment:** Should you talk about why we were there, the role of RSC in assisting the bridge building. I think a short intro about all of the learning exchanges is important. Why New Orleans why Orangeburg...etc.

Hope has asked our hosts, as well as other professors involved in art and more community members, if they would participate in open interviews.[8] They are folks who may have an investment in the process of bridging the gap between the University and the surrounding community. The theme was proposed by the local hosts, “*Why isn’t the community coming to the college?*”

Interview questions echo this theme and the RSC principles:

- *In what way do you see power structured in your community?*
- *What does dialogue mean to you? Are you interested in it? What about?*
- *How do you approach creating events in your community?*



**Latonnya Wallace and Alison Matthews, participants in the year-long conversation of five principles of engagement in Alternate ROOTS’ program for learning, Resources for Social Change.**

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The interviews are friendly and welcomed by all as an opportunity to test and build confidence. In this case the opposition between the insiders (the interviewees) and the outsider (Hope) have generated answers which may appear to break an ingrained silence the same way as lightning does the sky. Post-traumatic stress disorder of African-American communities; *What local roots mean*; Social Service limitations; Integration; Empathy ... , the talks become deep and personal. The data collected from the interviews show the complexity of the notions of power, power structures, dialogue, partnerships and the relationship they have with each other. People’s power lies in their capacity to initiate access to their resources, claim them, share ideas and visions and be creative or make art. People experience power structures as institutions that have the potential to limit them, because of history, in their positions at work, in their perceptions and actions, but also able to set them free if that power structure is about love or discipline. When one interviewee is asked about how he feels he has power, he started to talk about the power of our expressive arts and how AESTHETICS MEANS AWARENESS.

**Comment:** Should say who said this and the context for the statement.

Since then, we, and hopefully soon all RSC, will USE AWARENESS to DESCRIBE the NOTION of MULTIPLE AESTHETICS.

Justice seems to play a role when organizers are able to handle issues in an inclusive manner, recognizing history, using available information, insisting on diversity, being aware of labels and questioning motives, seeing connections that are made through experiences, promoting collaboration, giving people a chance to make choices, seeing art as an instigator for dialogue and facilitating knowledge of the self within the whole, with no fast expectations. Art has the power to initiate awareness in dialogue, but often requires access to resources and safe spaces. It may persuade participants to enlist their internal willingness to act.

In this RSC Learning Exchange the team wanted to propose an activity of identity:

*How do you identify when using sticky notes on your body? How risky is the activity? How evident may be the qualifiers? How childish may the exercise look?*

The activity may depend on the personality of the facilitators and the participants, the debriefing and the overall environment. We are looking for an emerging reality, an ongoing dialogue hopefully uncontrollable. But one's participation cannot be only an answer to the facilitator's proposal. From active object the participant must, at least temporarily but on a regular basis, become subject and experience/analyze/model all the individual and social actions/reactions that are part of our defense system in daily life. Today, introducing the possibility of copying other's ways of identifying or proposing one's own identity to others has helped generate common concerns, like "*Concerned with time,*" "*Looking at death*" ... Then those concerns are channeled toward exploring assets and renaming issues with a personified common language, whether it is a word, a sentence, or even through body language. The way the identities — the sticky notes — are organized on our bodies brings also the "art of looking" in parallel with the "art of listening." *What about identities as T-shirts to start a dialogue? T-shirts as identities ...*



**Melanie St. Ours and Pheobe Vlassis, participants in the year long conversation of five principles of engagement in Alternate ROOTS' program for learning, Resources for Social Change.**

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**Comment:** Living in the south and growing up in the north, I had to learn to accept everyone's investment in race and the projections of attitude and behavior. My former membership in the academic community was greatly affected by my peers' and parents' inability to measure the quality of instruction by the content and not the form (color of my skin). Whether an ethereal community or physical neighborhood locale, I wonder and appreciate art's ability to address and break the ice so dialogue can begin, but I often fear there is much dialogue and possibility for transformation lost in the titles that people have chosen or been assigned. Class, race, ethnicity ... how much do these identifications effect RSC partner assignments if at all. That shouldn't matter and I would even hope that it's based on talent and skill sets rather than titles but it is something to consider especially in communities where the investment in form is high.

The interviews were conceived as a possible method for the RSC process for facilitators and participants to gain knowledge through listening to experiences and thoughts. "*What can be done now with those interviews and their transcripts? Are they meant to remain private? A confession? Simply material for a thesis? How can they become parts of a conversation, a dialogue? Do they have the power to transgress? How can they engage the community in a movement?*" We are all artists. Kim, the host, suggests a public audio-installation. Her students may create artworks after listening to the interviews. The audio-installation may become multimedia. "*How can we make this happen? WHEN? What about critical responses to the eventual creation of art?*

Invigorated by the full experience of creating a first festival and hosting our RSC Learning Exchange, Kim Ledée decides to come along to the next Learning Exchange in Knoxville and to the following RSC retreat in Atlanta. The host has moved into participant leader within the RSC program. We are moving together.

**Honoring And Creating Partnerships, Carpetbag Theatre, Knoxville, Tenn., May 15-16, 2009**

"KEEP THE BABY, LET THE BATH WATER GO."[\[9\]](#)

As ROOTS RSC facilitators, it seems that we cannot just apply and teach a model. We need to add this extra dimension, which is risky, and work with the consequences of the risk: the dream, the process, the tools, the journeys and finally a place, a role, a journey and be part of a movement. We are not competing. We embrace self-selection. This is that old tradition that comes from organizers of the '60s and may be described with the wonderful speech of Martin Luther King: "I HAVE A DREAM ..." Don't we all have dreams? MLK was the spokesperson for the dreams of many. He was the artist able to express it louder. He had heard the dreams from many and had worked with so many people behind him, the known and the unknown. "Dreams are before projects." "To form a new community, you've got to find the one you left ... Keep the baby, let the bath water go."

Introducing the concept of a NOTE CATCHER: Large papers have been posted under various headings on the walls. Kim catches the discussion on those pages. Of course a "Note Catcher"

**Comment:** Brilliant!

is not as thorough as a "Note Taker." A Note Catcher is a direct actor in the dialogue, though and he/she may take the opportunity to practice language as an artist. And all of us are watching the notes being caught and can add more notes or even cross some out.

*EXCERPTS OF THE NOTES, THEIR HEADERS AND OTHER QUOTES*

- *ART. Re-visualize some of the wheels. Way of life. Representing our journey. New ways of hugging. Multiple entrees ...*
- *COMMUNITY. Ride. Inclusivity. Volunteer. Separatel/interlocking. I belong. Change the bath water, not the baby. Networking tools. I am a connector ...*
- *SHARED POWER. You know. We know. Intergenerational Cultural Center. A pound of lead = a pound of feather. Susu economics. We don't want to train leaders as they become oppressors ...*

**Comment:** They may they may not become oppressors. We don't want to train leaders that become oppressors. Maybe we need to talk more about all kind of leadership and their consequences or risks.

- *EQUAL PARTNERSHIP. Different but equal. Invested. Take turns. Grounded vs. "come here." Social business model. The invitation. Misanthrope for one hour...*
- *DIALOGUE. Boyaya boyaya. Is there a local "call to order" y'all use? Be the invitation — that's the community organizing. A) ... all transformation is personal (no). B) you've got to be the change (yes) ...*
- *MULTIPLE AESTHETICS. Diversity. Break rules. Transparent. No rules. A well-crafted lie is delicious. Community aesthetics, part of a lifestyle. Network aesthetics. Conveniences (balance of). Baby vs. bath water ...*
- *TRANSFORMATION. Generational bibliography. The journey. Change self. Remember. 'Crazy'. Directions....*
- *THE INSTITUTE OF ECONOMICS, VALUES AND LEADERSHIPS. Conduit of ideas and money. More gatherings — intentional invitees. Schools that work — intergenerational schools. Developing tenacity. Guerilla tactics — blogging, new technologies. Working models of economic success ...*  
*FOLLOW-UPS. Use existing potlucks as follow-ups to this meeting. Carpetbag Homecoming in Oct. Alternate Roots Annual Meeting in August.*[\[10\]](#)



**Mollie Lakin Hayes and Taranji Alvarado, participants in the year long conversation of five principles of engagement in Alternate ROOTS' program for learning, Resources for Social Change.**

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It may be time to ponder about the notion of exercises as opposed to real work: are facilitators abusing the principle of Shared Power?

What does it mean to have the power to ask questions? How is it different from talk shows? I have this power as a facilitator, I am partly here to make people talk and communicate. How, then, as a community member, can I take that power in my own hands, the power of asking questions to an attentive audience? Should questions be answered by questions? Can you ask questions?

In Knoxville, within a sociometric activity, the questions are asked by participants:

- Paula: *Have you been very enthusiastic lately about something that you don't know but have a talent for?*
- Kelly: *Do you know where the tools are for your next project?*
- Gwylene: *Do you feel you are a good partner?*
- Aisha: *Are you a good community organizer?*
- Linda: *All transformations are personal. Yes or no?*

The frustration of being a temporary facilitator is the drama of a community-based artist. It feels so short but so deep. One dreams of a long residency at the same site, long enough to engage the role of the arts — the local arts and the one brought by the artist — in a strategic action, part of a community movement for social justice. Engage in dialogue for necessary action.

#### **RSC Learning Exchange and Retreat, Atlanta Ga., June 12-14, 2009**

*TRANSFORMATION OF INDIVIDUALS: "Ability to cross the walls of their communities to reach to others without fear."* [\[11\]](#)

*"I", "WE"*

In this Learning Exchange the facilitators are very strongly encouraging participants to use "I" when speaking: a way to recognize that everyone has a story of their own that is worth being expressed publicly. Also, it is a way to make participants aware of the predigested thoughts that are available for grasp everyday in the media. However, in some cultures, to speak in terms of "I" is not so welcome, especially if you are young. One first needs to learn from others, before looking at the self as a specific identity. Or one may need to look at facts before letting feelings drive expression. Or the use of "I" may not be appropriate to one's status or class. And more simply the "I" may be kept for the personal, friends, the family, or chosen communities. "I" is not a topic for a show. The same cultures often keep you from calling by first name someone you barely know or someone older than you. Here, multiple truths needed to be acknowledged, researched and dug for. In the following RSC retreats, when someone uses "we," instead of being pushed into the privacy of "I," we want to ask, "What group does 'we' represent?"

**OVERALL GOALS OF LEARNING EXCHANGES:** to support arts-based practices that promote social justice, to discover and develop the assets of partnerships between artists, cultural workers, organizations and community, to expand ROOTS' knowledge in the fields of Community Arts in support of the larger movements towards social justice, to support Regional ROOTS Rhizome development, and to address and respond to specific issue-based requests from communities throughout the Southeastern United States.



**Randy Taylor and Sage Crump, participants in the year long conversation of five principles of engagement in Alternate ROOTS' program for learning, Resources for Social Change.**

[Click here to enlarge](#)

PRESENT, LOCAL GOALS: stated after a discussion between Resources for Social Change and the Local Hosts. Then a flexible team is assembled.

PONDERING AGAIN ABOUT THE NOTION OF EXERCISES AS OPPOSED TO REAL WORK. Quite a few people gathered here as RSC workgroup members to talk about the program on one day, and more joined us to attend the public Learning Exchange. All created mini-performances or human sculptures around the RSC principles. Some were expected and some were very creative. Are we (RSC?) participating in creative education, using art-based practices for creative exploration around community issues, or just making art? What do you think artists do if it is always so easy and so fun together? Here is a thought: Maybe we are participating in promoting the myth of contemporary arts as a light affair, the fun or despair of a few, as opposed to actively placing the arts in a personal/universal journey that brings us — collaborative artists, community-based artists — into the fight for the cultures we dream of.

And what is the purpose of art as a product?

**Comment:** Especially in connection to the earlier art/capitalism statement. Also what is the role of the product in metabolizing/embodying practices or dialogues around social justice? I still remember dancing across the floor with my partner. We were both really into contact improv and felt comfortable touching, me a black younger woman, her an older white woman were able through creative production to create a new language, an embodied one or metalanguage that brought us into community. Intention, desire, creative potential that resulted in a product did all of this!

How are these products used? What kind of ongoing dialogue or sustainable movement are they part of? What is their role in sustaining the movement for social justice after the successes and failures of a process have passed? What kind of criteria or art definition do they create or move to action?

*“We meet the task by working, we make a path by walking.”* [\[12\]](#) Printing or reworking images or fabricating objects may be an alternative way to mark our paths, create our common memories. They may become not only part of the nonverbal dialogue but a necessity for establishing equal learners in partnership.

So, where are we as artists in a RSC Learning Exchange? In a Learning Exchange that is not part of an artistic process?

**Comment:** Are we creating a division between artists and creatives? I am not sure I agree that artists are hard to find in the learning exchange process. It seems to me, and maybe this is not present, that the art should lead because we are an arts activism org not an activism arts org or an admin artists org. RSC should push to have the art out front to open the dialogue. If we are asking the question where are we as artists... we need some real clarity individually and as a group.

Some facilitators are teachers as well, some facilitators are administrators as well, some are organizers and some are artists as well. Some facilitators are everything as well. They are multidisciplinary by necessity (\$), capability and/or choice. What have the arts to do with all that and what does that do to the arts? Where does their work fit in the selective memory of art history and art marketing? Will it be taught and documented? Facilitators and artists are documenters as well. It is understood that RSC participants are often “actors” and observers at the same time. RSC participants are here, at home and in their own projects at the same time. “*The way one sees when one does art is different from when one facilitates. Yes? No?*”; “*Transformation is not a linear, gradual process,*” although that is the most common way of planning it and reporting on it with words. “*RSC facilitators’ ability to be the net — the backer, not the helper — is key in developing leadership programs*”; “*The risk-taking may be attractive to others or any type of audience, just as leadership is attractive*”; “*If there are only two people in a team of facilitators, there is no room to move*”; “*One function of leadership is to keep the intention at the forefront*”; “*We can enter as equal learners and acknowledge the more experienced people*”; “*I crave for a continued dialogue about the power dynamics of the communities we work with*”; “*Leadership is not the pinnacle of the pyramid, it is on the ground, moving around; it is the net*”; “*Do we want to build a field or a movement?*”;



**Taye Beasley and Bruce France, participants in the year long conversation of five principles of engagement in Alternate ROOTS’ program for learning, Resources for Social Change.**

[Click here to enlarge](#)

**Comment:** A movement!!! Mama Nayo used to tell me “we need a movement.”

“*Here is an answer: If we have a mission and a goal we have a movement in our field. Yet, is that enough?*”<sup>[13]</sup>

**Comment:** Hell no!

Not being engaged in any leading roles in the Atlanta Learning Exchange, we, Hope and Gwylene, are back to recording random conversations,

**Comment:** I sense a bit of necessary humor here!

using the same cards of questions as in New Orleans and attempting to develop this process as a tool, a resource for social change. The cards are taken away for some conversations, encouraging people to develop their own questions. Participants have been in the same room for a while. They have heard one another and wish to know someone better. They have questions. For a few, the recording is an opportunity to go further from the secure space of the workshop, reflect, go back in time or address real life. “*A community liaison is what we need, someone who can connect us to existing businesses, someone who can hear our ideas and build new alliances*”; “*I have choices. I have the power of choosing my perspective, changing my own world, be at peace with my work. All that through active listening and daily creation*”; “*In those discussions, there is plenty of room to agree, but not enough to dissent and discuss. If one disagrees it slows down the process, sounds bad*”; “*Personal ecology: need of change, how is that going to be OK for the rest of my life? Sustainability? It’s never finished as it is a tension*”; “*When is the work affecting change in the community? When is it finished? How to look*

**Comment:** Yes. Where is the spirit of process and not letting again the product run the process? I think there is a commentary on art in a capitalist society here, underneath! Bring it out. If another world, person, city, united states is possible, what does the political economy that accompanies such a space where art is about process and justice and not money and domination!!!

*at that?"; "If I perform a piece at the corner in the street, is it affecting the community? I don't think so. It is my work and mostly I performed there to fulfill my need to perform. I did not involve any community"; "Personal, Social, Political, Spiritual"; "I am speaking my voice but actually I like to hear what others say, how they create themselves, as it is not about finding yourself but about creating yourself, learning how to ask questions and listen."* [14]

### **The Highway to Nowhere & Hidden Streams, CultureWorks, Baltimore, Md., July 23-26, 2009** [15]

This is a different kind of engagement. It is not called a Learning Exchange.

**Comment:** The learning happens differently the resources are exchanged or shared differently.

It's called a Partnership (by Hope) or a Strategic Planning Session for CultureWorks (by Bob). We arrive with three specific intended outcomes and a loose plan for a series of community meetings. We know we want to explore how a group called the Committee for Art & Culture, which developed out of the West Baltimore Coalition, identifies itself in relationship to CultureWorks, and how to work toward growing cultural leadership. Also, we want to explore ways to build the community cultural organizing capacity of CultureWorks itself (forms of organizing, fund raising and how its mission is connected to the Arts and Culture committee and the broader cultural issues beyond community redevelopment and revitalization); ways to develop support and advancement of CultureWorks as a key cultural organizing project in an overall plan for community cultural development in the neighborhoods of West Baltimore. [16]

We use the Partnership Work Kit [17] as a guide to talk about what we think is ROOTS' potential in relationship with CultureWorks. We ask potential partners what their perceptions of the project are and what functions they might provide. With Ray [18], Hope draws figures on the RSC principles that were developed from the interviews recorded in Orangeburg. They are put up on large sheets of paper around the room. Maurice plays music with other members of the Art and Culture committee. Everyone eats and listens. Hope talks and dances to introduce the figures and how they were developed. She proposes to use them as catalysts for conversation. People say what they like and don't like about them, what they disagree with and agree with. There is discussion about power and tools that resolve conflict. The "power" figure that everyone is looking at is seen as a circle of themes: art, access to resources, claiming resources, sharing ideas, initiation and group vision. The "tools that resolve conflict" figure has THE THEMES, FACTS, EMPATHY AND DIALOGUE LAYERED OVER THE THEME OF POWER. *"I like 'claiming resources', "I am not sure about facts being a tool," "I see it, because there are so many difference perspectives in conflict and facts can help people dialogue and empathize," "I see power as dangerous."*

As we continue dialogue, an elder participant talks dramatically of HOW HIS CULTURE HAS BEEN STOLEN. Hope rises to recognize the weight of his words, to *STAND BY HIM*, to dance with gesture for him and for her, to honor him. *"School children DON'T HAVE ART IN SCHOOL ANYMORE," "We need to bring back art"; "Don't feel lost"; "I don't feel lost, I have been to Africa. I HAVE SEEN MY PEOPLE."* [19]

**Comment:** Yes, we need a space to talk about the knowledge, the intelligence in our bones, cultural separation, cultural knowledge, where it is, racism and institutional oppression. What is the role of the learning exchange/partnership./etc in unearthing these structural issues.

How to gain strength; the struggle against injustice and the outcome of history: the figures spawned dialogue. But Ray would have liked them to be originally developed from that group instead of put up, already drawn. Yes. This would have been best. Ask the questions anew for each different group. *What do*

*the principles mean to you? Is this the ongoing dialogue? We know we believe in the power of culture. We want to create positive social change. Will you stay and be with me to listen?*

### **Documentation for Whom?**

We did four short videos at four Learning Exchanges. They are active in shaping the collective memory of each event, which may mean that they will be what will still be remembered next year. But every time a different choice was made. In New Orleans, our selective process only kept conversations that followed the format described above, then eliminated a few parts for various technical reasons. *We ain't no professionals.* The DVD has been made available to *ya'll participants, for your own use.* For Orangeburg, the ten-minute tape recalls ideas, dreams, what was hoped and may be decided. It is a reminder for the major actors there, the local hosts. *It is for you, in your hands. We will continue to work together.* In Knoxville, the main recording happened during the sociometric activity that generated a conversation on organizing. It is an energizing segment for some, philosophy for others, that seems to be able to generate more conversations among RSC teams and could be used for training. *Thank you so much for that, your words have been heard beyond today.* In Atlanta, the conversations are incisive, critical or very personal. They do not represent the Learning Exchange but do picture some of the ROOTS spirit. *Where is it going?*



**Wes Williams and Adam Tourek, participants in the year long conversation of five principles of engagement in Alternate ROOTS' program for learning, Resources for Social Change.**

[Click here to enlarge](#)

You who do not have the possibility to take time to concentrate and read, you who are abused by poor and semi-poor conditions of living, and you who do not like books, you who only have time to read the conclusion, you are a very important intended audience for the content of this paper along with the participants in the projects. The ongoing dialogue can happen, LIVE. Art can have multiple entrées. No one needs to understand the whole. We don't. Touch it, feel it, LET IT OPEN A TRAIL. Action!

**Comments:** Yes and more! Everyday. Great. Thanks for recording and archiving this work through your sweat energy intelligence and insistence. Love much always.

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*This essay is part of the Community Arts Convening & Research Project, 2009-10, funded by a Nathan Cummings Foundation grant to the Maryland Institute College of Art. The project's Editorial Board includes: Stephani Woodson, Arizona State University; Amalia Mesa-Bains, California State University Monterey Bay; Paul Teruel, Columbia College Chicago; Marina Gutierrez, Cooper Union; Jan Cohen-Cruz, Imagining America; Ken Krafchek, Maryland Institute College of Art; Lori Hager, University of Oregon; and Sonia BasSheva Mañjon, Wesleyan University.*

**Hope Clark**, a dancer with Elizabeth Streb, 1991-1999, designed and directed Kid Action from 1993 through 1999 is now a national trainer for an organization called Community Matters, working with students and adults on how to prevent mistreatments through role plays and small-group support networks. Her master's thesis in Intercultural Service, Leadership and Management from the SIT Graduate Institute on the Alternate ROOTS Resources for Social Change program informs this text and the process of this text informed the thesis. She has also been working in Chestertown, Md., with Karen Somerville, founder of the African American Schoolhouse Museum & Heritage Council, on documentation and the reenactment of a historical Decoration Day Parade performed by Black Union Civil War Veterans in Kent County.

**Gwylène Gallimard** is a visual artist with a background in research and experimentation on collaborative ways of producing art . Based in Charleston, S.C., she often works with her partner Jean-Marie Mauclet. They are presently creating a large participatory installation at 701 Contemporary Art Center in Columbia SC on the nearby Olympia cotton mills and villages.

## NOTES

[1] RSC Mission: The Resources for Social Change (RSC) program of Alternate ROOTS seeks to uphold the cultural organizing work of Alternate ROOTS and its mission to eliminate all forms of oppression. RSC honors and utilizes the experience and expertise of communities in facilitating interactive and participatory gatherings. Using the lens of the RSC Principles of Community Engagement: Shared Power, Equal Partnership, Open Dialogue, Aesthetics of Transparent Processes and Collective and Individual Transformation. RSC provides workshops, mentorship and peer education to support the use of art as a tool for social justice and to promote practices that are inclusive, ethical and equitable. See <http://www.alternateroots.org>.

[2] “State of the Nation is an annual art and performance festival that brings together artists from across the United States who are committed to addressing social, political, and economic issues facing the Gulf South and the country-at-large.” RSC is presenting two workshops there and leading evaluation. They are lead by Stephen Clapp and Laura Shandlemeier.

[3] Rhizomes are small, mostly geographical, groupings of ROOTS members and friends who convene and participate in ROOTS-related activities across the region.

[4] Quoted from a video recorded at the Southeast Social Forum, (Atlanta, Ga., June 2007): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVPhf5WfrME>

[5] Excerpts from recorded conversations between Wes Williams & Adam Tourek, Kathy Randels & Ebony Golden, Melanie St Ours & Phoebe Vlassis, Mai-Lien Johnson & Josh Lucas, Latonnya Wallace & Alison Matthews, Tay Beasley & Bruce France, Edward Buckner & Troy Jones

[6] RSC team: Hope Clark, Gwylene Gallimard, Ebony Golden, Kim Ledée, Shon Sims, Delvina Wescott

[7] Shon Sims in the opening performance with Ebony Golden

[8] Two community members, Ms. Ali and Ms. Brown; an art history professor, Frank Martin; a museum director, Ellen Zielholz; the two co-hosts of the program, Kim Ledée and Delvina Wescott; a hip-hop ROOTS local artist, Omari Fox; and a co-worker and artist, Latonnya Wallace.

[9] Paula Larke

[10] Excerpts come from participants in the six-hour-long Learning Exchange of 05/16/09.

[11] Words in italics in the Atlanta section are collected from notes taken during the RSC retreat and the Learning Exchange, or recorded conversations in Atlanta, unless otherwise noted.

[12] After “We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change” by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire

[13] Conversations involved Kinge & Shon Sims, Mollie Lakin Hayes, Taranji Alvarado and Jeremy Thornton, Amy Stewart Hale & Dana Richardson Wise, Gwylene Gallimard & Sage Crump, Randy Taylor & Sage Crump, Brittany Rumsey & Hope Clark.

[14] See footnote 17.

[15] Led by RSC facilitators Hope Clark, Bob Leonard and Maurice Turner. Ashley Milburn organized the hosting of the program

[16] Bob Leonard's summary report

[17] Access to this is at <http://alternateroots.org/programs/rsc#attachments>.

[18] A member of the Art & Culture Committee

[19] Participants' comments in italics and bold are from the Learning Exchange with Bon Secours staff, the Committee for Art and Culture and CultureWorks.

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