

Voices From The Cultural Battlefront



Organizing For Equity

www.culturalbattlefront.net

—Introduction—

WE COME TOGETHER to embrace our friends and to confront our enemies.

We come from the barrios and ghettos of big cities, from the farms and fields of rural communities, from the reservations of indigenous peoples and the marginalized spaces inhabited by immigrants. From coast to coast, border to border, we are community grounded artists at the battlefront of a struggle to achieve cultural equity.

This document is to help us dialogue and reach consensus on the specifics of our struggle for cultural equity at local, regional, national and global levels. By cultural equity we mean every cultural community, howsoever that community identifies itself, having the power to define itself and develop itself in peaceful concert with other cultural communities.

This document continues an ongoing discussion that grew out of a series of conferences in the early nineties.* The goal then was to share experiences and find common areas of work to help sustain community grounded cultural work. We were, and remain, focused not on the arts per se but on the material and spiritual health and welfare of our diverse communities.

From the beginning we were artists who were locally based and at the same time interested in global developments. Each of our conferences had international representation.

We were artists active in the full array of disciplines with a common concern for expressing the realities of our various communities.

We recognize that we have both major and minor differences among ourselves. In some cases we speak different languages. In other cases we have different social structures, different religious and political beliefs.

Sometimes our differences clash. Cultural equity does not pretend contradictions don't exist. Cultural equity means that we acknowledge our differences and work for ways to live together in diversity rather than fight each other in conflict.

On a practical level, cultural equity means that we not only speak to each other, we also actually listen to each other. We work together where we can and accept that we have different ways of living. We don't try to force each other to commit to the same beliefs and social structures.

Cultural equity means that we share a responsibility to take care of our environment, to clean up when we mess up, to sustain life (both our own and others), to help each other where we can and most certainly to do no harm to our environment and to all of human life.

Cultural equity also means defending ourselves and protecting others, offering sanctuary to those fleeing oppression and sharing resources with those in need.

Cultural equity is the dynamic of exchange for the purpose of mutual growth and development. Rather than convert others we

want to appreciate and learn from others.

Cultural equity means that we recognize, analyze and resist the forces that oppress and exploit our communities. Cultural equity is not passive. Cultural equity is active work to develop ourselves as human beings sharing the planet with other humans.

Cultural equity means believing in the inherent genius of every cultural community.

Cultural equity is not possible without dialogue, without sharing. Our call is for us to share each other's stories.

This document is part of the ongoing discussion about who we are and what are the conditions we face as we strive to create a better and more beautiful world. We continue to work on defining our realities.

This is not a manifesto, nor a blueprint for change, rather this document is a contribution to an ongoing discussion. This discussion continues on our website: www.culturalbattlefront.net

Join us, please. Share your story, your views, your history, your dreams. Let us put our heads and hearts together and experience the joy and strength of living together in mutual respect.

Kalamu ya Salaam, Voices for Cultural Equity
www.culturalbattlefront.net

* This work is an initiative of the "Sustaining Voices From the Battlefront Achieving Cultural Equity" conference organized by the Caribbean Cultural Center - African Diaspora Institute with partial funding from the Ford Foundation and Nathan Cummings Foundation.

.....

Some of us are working on issues of justice, equity, freedom for our communities, and some of us are just doing art, and there's a difference. We need to clarify the language that we use to define what it is we're doing. I've never been about the art. The art conversation has always limited our possibilities given the structures of funding. It's never been about the art because I always knew that there were great artists in our communities. It's been about providing voice to the issues in our communities. It was never a goal to have artists hang at the Met, and it was never a goal to develop institutions that were mini-Mets, Black, Latina, or Asian. That was never the goal! But it was the goal for some. We shouldn't confuse the work of equity, racial justice, economic justice, with art.

Marta Moreno Vega
Caribbean Cultural Center
New York City

**30 Years and Counting:
A Context for Building
A Shared Cross-Cultural Commons**
by Jack (John Kuo Wei) Tchen

PROLOGUE

This essay and synopsis were written for "Sustaining Voices from the Battlefront: Community Grounded Cultural Arts Organizations @ 30," a conference convened by The Caribbean Cultural Center/ African Diaspora Institute at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, June 8-9, 2007. (Revised 9.19.07)

The preamble to the conference was:

The struggle for cultural rights and cultural equity is linked to the struggle for political and economic rights and integral to the quest for human rights. These struggles are meaningless if we do not protect our Mother Earth.

As a way to assess the current state of the movement, including its present problems and opportunities, the convening will focus on the historical efforts to end racism and achieve cultural equity, concentrating on the historical link between art and social justice and how new leaders are enacting this powerful history.

At the end of the conference it was agreed a series of further gatherings would be organized around the country and this paper be made available for those sessions. A draft version was circulated for comments. This is a revised version, dated 9/19/07.

We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967

The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Howard Zinn, 2006 (208)

SUMMARY

"30 Years and Counting" was drafted for the June 2007 conference to promote a cross-generational dialogue at the sessions, this paper helped to frame the thirty-year context of the discussion.

In the world of art, culture, and the humanities, the clashes of the 1980s into the '90s and present have been formulated as a series of "culture wars" between "liberals" and "conservatives." This essay proposes it is more useful to understand these conflicts within the broader frame of a reorganizing political culture of "hypercapitalism," or what has also been called "neoliberalism."

This new regime fantasizes "the new world order" as a place like the one depicted in the brilliant Visa Check commercials where we can all happily dance and spend everywhere and anytime as if we all live in a perpetual Hollywood musical. Such are promises of the "free market" and "free trade" for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" at home and abroad.

This dramatic move to privatize all and subject all rewards to the

marketplace is a return to “the survival of the fittest” ideology of elites. We are brought back to the world of King Midas and his “touch.” All he touched turned to his coveted gold. At first this seemed to be exactly what he dreamt for, but then even his food and drink, and even his loved ones became dead, frozen wealth—he found himself alone, lonely and devastated.

Such a false system of survival “merit” serves to promote massive individual alienation and social fragmentation. It destroys what we have left of a public commons—a shared, inclusive space not privileging private wealth and power over basic human rights and values. If the Midas touch of neoliberalism creates hollow selves, hollow cities and hollow cultures, we must ask: What can we do about this!?

This is the question posed for those involved in cultural work and the fight for cultural equity and justice around the country—in each region, in each locale we need to listen and talk about what has happened over these past 30 years and brainstorm what we can do to rouse us out of this druggy fairytale fantasy. How can we work together, in all our diversity, to build a shared cross-cultural commons? (10/07)

30 Years and Counting: A Context for Building A Shared Cross-Cultural Commons

We are diverse.
We come from different groundings.
From cultures old and new,
We intersect in different ways.
We diverge in different ways.
Yet our differences,
recognized in their ever-shifting fullness,
only describe part of who we are.

We are multitudes.
We are mixed.
We coalesce.
We recombine.
We are constant only in our changing.

Despite our cultural, regional, positional and infinite differences,
And the fractal complexities within each of our
bodies, souls, spirits....
We ask today, what do we share?

Now, more than ever, we know we share everything!

In 30 years, we now know...
...we share the conceits of Western Enlightenment rationalism. We
still live the consequences of that system's repressed unconscious—
the nightmarish shadows of colonialism, enslavement, indentureship
and overall nasty rudeness. We also

share the rise and fall, not of civilizations as some would have us believe, but the rise and fall of globalizing power strip mining resources and our spirits to become profitable good workers and good consumers. The power now moves, much to the thrill and fears of Western corporations to the Asia/Pacific and wherever else it can expand.

In 30 years, we now know...

... our blood can be traced back from our individual islands, through the land masses upon which we've migrated over the streams, over the seas, back, back, back to mother Africa. Most of us have passed through that place in between Africa, Asia, and Europe. And from there we became all the more diverse and different while reaffirming we are the same.

In 30 years, we now know...

... the ice that melts up there, the fire that burns down here, the rock crushed within, the air breathed out.... are all disrupted, perhaps beyond re-equilibrium to sustain human life much longer.

In 30 years, we now know...

... we not only share blood, and the ecosystem, we also share "a new world order." This was barely predictable in the 1970s but now it surrounds us and inhabits the digitized, frequencied air we twitch in and breathe, the foods we savor that render us toxic, the sounds we beat to and can't bear, and the spaces we move through and avoid. The 30-year difference is omnipresent in our surround. The bees know it. And we do too.

We now know we...are all, simultaneously, varied and one: seven generations (and more) back and seven and more generations (and

share the rise and fall, not of civilizations as some would have us believe, but the rise and fall of globalizing power strip mining resources and our spirits to become profitable good workers and good consumers. The power now moves, much to the thrill and fears of Western corporations to the Asia/Pacific and wherever else it can expand.

In 30 years, we now know...

... our blood can be traced back from our individual islands, through the land masses upon which we've migrated over the streams, over the seas, back, back, back to mother Africa. Most of us have passed through that place in between Africa, Asia, and Europe. And from there we became all the more diverse and different while reaffirming we are the same.

In 30 years, we now know...

... the ice that melts up there, the fire that burns down here, the rock crushed within, the air breathed out.... are all disrupted, perhaps beyond re-equilibrium to sustain human life much longer.

In 30 years, we now know...

... we not only share blood, and the ecosystem, we also share "a new world order." This was barely predictable in the 1970s but now it surrounds us and inhabits the digitized, frequencied air we twitch in and breathe, the foods we savor that render us toxic, the sounds we beat to and can't bear, and the spaces we move through and avoid. The 30-year difference is omnipresent in our surround. The bees know it. And we do too.

We now know we...are all, simultaneously, varied and one: seven generations (and more) back and seven and more generations (and

more) ahead.

And we all have battle stories from each place we've been.
We are surviving veterans of battles long ago and of this moment.
We are veterans of wars "foreign" and "civil."
As we gather around this campfire for this barn raising,
we are weary, still fighting, and in it for the long term.
We are here for some sustenance, a few moments
to rest, to reflect and to regroup
before we go back out there.

Can we collectively re-member 30 years back? Back before
"American Idol," before the paranoia of Homeland Security, before
Madonna, before disco? Can we remember the time before Elvis
died (1977), before hip-hop, before punk? Sometime around when
Sam Walton founded Wal-Mart in 1969?

For a moment in U.S. political culture, high and middlebrow
culture-making were upended by radical movements. Veterans in
the room know this happened worldwide. Nineteen Sixty-Eight was
a watershed year for youth and progressive movements in much of
the capitalist Western world and beyond. In the '70s, '80s, '90s, and
2000s movements, subcultures and migrants, often led by youth,
continue to challenge the authoritarianism of the status quo. And
within these movements, subcultures and migrants are our new
poets, musicians, muralists, dancers, writers and all the other cultural
activists. Generations of community-based organizations emerged.
Even foundation and public funding guidelines were changing to
support "history from the bottoms up" projects and community-
based arts groups sprouting up in disenfranchised communities.

The organizations and ideals represented by this conference gathering have been and still are among the movers and shakers of this liberating social movement against conformity, alienation and social injustice. (Goldbard; Karp; Vega) We've won some victories. A great many people have been able to challenge and expand what it means to be a cultured and educated U.S. American. And we've lost many battles. But we're still fighting!

The conditions have changed in these 30 years. This paper reflects on those changes and raises the question to you, cultural organizations and activists out there, to reflect on and share your current practices and strategies. I was asked to provide a background paper for the conference as a whole, so my focus on state and corporate power does not mean we have no alternatives and are doomed. Far from it, there's as much if not more great work being done now than 30 years ago. Youth today have formed new organizations and operate in new ways. And their "groundings" are different and just as important. What can we learn from them? What can they learn from us? It is clear the battlegrounds have shifted and the terrain has become even more international. Yet we often don't have a chance to catch our breath and talk about the larger contexts we work within.

The "New World Order"

If you watch television, you've seen it. The Visa Check Card musicals. Happy dancers twirling gaily through a gourmet deli, a lawn and garden center, a food court, consuming like Disney automatons smoothly, efficiently paying to keep the consumer paradise moving. Then one person pays with a check or cash

and the glorious world stops to wait—disrupting the smooth, conformist flow of money for “happiness.”

This is a brilliant, nauseating 59 seconds that embodies two key changes of the past 30 years. The race to the bottom in filling our lives with colorful, plastic, cheap disposable goods made and consumed without borders by those who can pay in the credit system. And, the digital technology to circulate electronic transfers and create the computer graphic images that makes this musical fantasy seemingly real.

Yet, we know just as Woodstock was celebrated as the symbol of the new youth counterculture, at least in the media, and just as the utopic promises of today's cyber culture opening ACCESS to ALL!—these new shared spaces have shadowy twins. In the 1960s, they knew how to sell houses, cars and picket fences, but how to sell to this new rebellious generation? Woodstock's mass appeal pointed a way for corporations to find new ways to cash in on that emergent youth culture. Behind the scenes, entrepreneurial capitalists were organizing and have organized to respond to our crazy, eclectic, liberating cultural revolution with what was later to be called the “Reagan revolution.”

Little did we realize just at the moment so many good things were beginning to happen, other forces were aligning. From Barry Goldwater's defeated candidacy, through Nixon's resignation, to the defeat of the Labour Party in England and the elections of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and Reagan in 1981, a new type of laissez faire “free market” counter-counter political cultural formation organized and took over British and U.S. governments. They have been so effective and efficient, we still have a limited

way to describe what happened in general, let alone understand how this counter-revolution has impacted on our cultural work of the past 30 years. But THEY have indeed created the "New World Order."

Who is this "they"? What have been some of their impacts on what we do? I'm interested in the culture created by this regime of hypercapitalism and how we can strategize to resist its destructive impacts and seductions. We know globalization does not occur only under hypercapitalism and democracy cannot be reduced to laissez faire ideology, yet this is what the powers that be want us to believe. Many of us don't "buy" this and operate alternative exchange relationships everyday. But we do so despite this huge invasive work-buy-sell now! juggernaut.

In the name of freedom and democracy, "they" are a range of people who work behind the scenes and have set platforms and agendas that now dominate our national political culture. Karl Rove, Paul Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld are much in the news. But for cultural policies Lynn Cheney and William Bennett have been key. Their neoconservative think tanks include The Cato Institute, The American Enterprise Institute, The Hudson Institute, The Manhattan Institute, The Heritage Foundation, The Olin Foundation, The New York Sun, etc. As a group they have been described as neoconservatives or the new right, but I agree with analysts who also call them "neoliberals." Neoliberalism is a term that might be a bit counterintuitive at first but I want to demonstrate its utility for understanding our "culture wars."

"They" are not a conspiracy but a shrewd network of organizers who have forged an ideologically coherent domestic and foreign

policy—the most effective since Roosevelt’s “New Deal”—indeed that is what they have displaced. The term “liberal” is defined in the narrow economic sense of the term—as a freeing of markets from government controls. Noam Chomsky, writing in 1999, defines “The neoliberal Washington consensus” as “an array of market oriented principles designed by the government of the United States and the international financial institutions that it largely dominates, and implemented by them in various ways.” The basic rules: “liberalize trade and finance, let markets set price, end inflation, privatize.” (Chomsky, 19-20) French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu writes in less muted terms.

The neoliberal utopia tends to embody itself in the reality of a kind of infernal machine, whose necessity imposes itself even upon the rulers. They want independent central banks. And they preach the subordination of nation-states to the requirements of economic freedom for the masters of the economy, with the suppression of any regulation of any market, beginning with the labour market, the prohibition of deficits and inflation, the general privatization of public services, and the reduction of public and social expenses. (Bourdieu 1998, 36)

Freedom is strictly defined in terms of freeing trade of all regulations and restrictions. The meaning of the term “liberal” is defined, at core, the pure freedom to exchange by anyone without considerations of differentials of power.

Austrian scholar Friedrich von Hayek (1899-1992) was one of neoliberalism’s founding thinkers. “Our definition of liberty,” he writes “depends upon the meaning of the concept of coercion.” And the chief cause of coercion is unlimited government power. (Hayek, 20-21) At the core of freedom is, in this view, the “free price system,” the fabled “invisible hand” of free-market capitalists

believe alone should be left to regulate human relations and government policies. Pulitzer Prize-winning, University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman applied Hayek's ideas most influentially into the U.S. context. In his 1962 book "Capitalism and Freedom," Friedman advocated minimizing the role of government in a free market as a means of creating political and social freedom. In his 1980 PBS television series "Free to Choose" Friedman explained how the free market works, emphasizing that its principles have shown to solve social and political problems that other systems have failed to address adequately.

British and U.S. domestic and foreign policies have been transformed by neoliberal makeovers. After winning the 1979 election, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher appointed Keith Joseph, the director of the Hayekian Centre for Policy Studies, as her secretary of state for industry in an effort to redirect parliament's economic strategies. (Ranelagh, 1991) What was known as Thatcherism was soon adopted by newly elected President Ronald Reagan with a vengeance. David Stockton of the Office of Management and Budget was given extraordinary powers to cut the budget. In the U.S., "welfare," like "the dole" in England, became a dirty word. Representing women as "welfare queens" betrayed the crude misogyny and racism against African-American women, despite actual numbers of more white poor. This tactic was paired with the later bogey of "Willie Horton," symbolic of supposed dangerous African-American male prisoners released on the street. Apparently, "the free-price system" also meant the freedom to exploit time-worn stereotypic WASP hatreds toward those not white, not Anglo-Saxon, not Protestant, not property owning and not sexually repressed.

capitalists believe alone should be left to regulate human relations and government policies. Pulitzer Prize-winning, University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman applied Hayek's ideas most influentially into the U.S. context. In his 1962 book "Capitalism and Freedom," Friedman advocated minimizing the role of government in a free market as a means of creating political and social freedom. In his 1980 PBS television series "Free to Choose" Friedman explained how the free market works, emphasizing that its principles have shown to solve social and political problems that other systems have failed to address adequately.

British and U.S. domestic and foreign policies have been transformed by neoliberal makeovers. After winning the 1979 election, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher appointed Keith Joseph, the director of the Hayekian Centre for Policy Studies, as her secretary of state for industry in an effort to redirect parliament's economic strategies. (Ranelagh, 1991) What was known as Thatcherism was soon adopted by newly elected President Ronald Reagan with a vengeance. David Stockton of the Office of Management and Budget was given extraordinary powers to cut the budget. In the U.S., "welfare," like "the dole" in England, became a dirty word. Representing women as "welfare queens" betrayed the crude misogyny and racism against African-American women, despite actual numbers of more white poor. This tactic was paired with the later bogey of "Willie Horton," symbolic of supposed dangerous African-American male prisoners released on the street. Apparently, "the free-price system" also meant the freedom to exploit time-worn stereotypic WASP hatreds toward those not white, not Anglo-Saxon, not Protestant, not property owning and not sexually repressed.

Chomsky's libertarian socialist critique, barely visible in the white noise of the new world order, is worth bearing in mind for cultural activists. Core value of freedom is the freedom for self-realization not the freedom "to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another." (Chomsky & Otero, 25) Chomsky writes:

A consistent libertarian must oppose not only alienated labor but also the stupefying specialization of labor that takes place when the means of developing production "mutilate the worker into a fragment of a human being, degrade him to become a mere appurtenance of the machine, makes his work such a torment that its essential meaning is destroyed." (Chomsky & Otero, 26)

Furthermore, Chomsky argues:

A truly democratic community is one in which the general public has the opportunity for meaningful and constructive participation in the formation of social policy.... A society that excludes large areas of crucial decision-making from public control, or a system of governance that merely grants the general public the opportunity to ratify decisions taken by the elite groups... hardly merits the term democracy." (Albert)

There are Markets and there are markets. States and corporations run the Markets. But everyday people thrive with human-scale exchanges where, Arlene Goldbard reminds us: "people devise ways to locate and exchange cultural goods that broaden their horizons, and in some places, give them glimpses of freedom from whatever is most oppressive in their own economies, governments, or heritage cultures."

And further, the policies of the government are ever present and cannot be minimized as the "free enterprise" advocates claim. The realities of private and top-down authoritarian corporate

power, gives the state the option of supporting such private power or regulating it on behalf of the public good. Deregulation in the name of market freedom is like "having the fox guard the chicken house," in this case the Fox is Rupert Murdoch the owner of the Fox Network and News Corporation and global media mogul, buying his way in charge of the chicken house and soon perhaps even The Wall Street Journal. This tyranny of corporations as determining all values and manufacturing the distracted consent of the masses. How can freedom flourish when corporations are not held legally accountable to the social good? Indeed, as made quite clear by Joel Bakan's book and film, *"The Corporation"* (2003) subtitled *"The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power,"* the corporation is a psychopath. It is amoral and only values its own selfish wants—that of making more profits for its stockholders. The fantastic endless consumer musical, the Dance of Visa, must continue at all costs!

"Culture Wars"

This brings us to assess the damage of what we know has been done in what has somewhat accurately been dubbed as "the culture wars." I say "somewhat accurately" because we in the arts and humanities tend to define the struggles we've been having too narrowly. It is not just the specific assault on intellectual and artistic freedom and the dramatic cutbacks in funding. The early NEA "witch hunts," the Andres Serrano *"Piss Christ"* (1989) or Chris Ofili *"The Holy Virgin Mary"* (1999) moments, or the Enola Gay at the Smithsonian (1995) did huge damage to be certain. And we surely understand it was part of the simultaneous cooptation of social democratic politics. The virulent misogyny, homophobia and anti-people-of-color attacks were still mobilized when needed

in public discourse.

But the new strategy was also to raise the profile of a generation of elitist think-tank babies of color. Thomas Sowell, Dinesh DeSouza, Linda Chavez and Shelby Steele, for example, were the first generation of publicly engaged intellectuals. The neoconservative calls for eliminating arts and humanities organizations was soon replaced with a more nuanced strategy. The NEA and NEH, for example, would continue the role of managing and containing more radical culture-making, but also begin to shift government funding to partnerships with a more conservative nonprofit sector and privatized funding. (Yudice, 292-94) In 20 years, cabinet positions to General Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Alberto Gonzalez and Elaine Chao, were to follow. The reinvented neoliberal Federal Government is not so much about the libertarian shrinking of the role of government so much as rededicating its still massive if not growing size to enhancing private and corporate interests over larger issues of social welfare and equity. They are what poet Sekou Sundiata has called "Black faces in high places," exposing the limits of affirmative action without a social agenda and a historical memory. In the global arena, elite whites demonstrate their "colorblindness" by hiring and recognizing elite nonwhites while the great masses of people are still segregated by poverty and color. Is this what conservative libertarians mean by "freedom"? Certainly these skirmishes were part of larger battles. We knew it then and we know it now. But do we need to understand the war?

The war is what neoliberals did to the New Deal and its legacy. They first assaulted the social dimensions of the civil rights and peoples' movement of the '50s into the early '70s and affirmed the

white, male, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle-class emphasis on individual opportunity. They then sought to dismantle the Johnson/Kennedy era "Great Society" affirmative actions in all realms of social policy. They then went after the system of the New Deal social reforms itself. This included honoring labor unions as part of the social contract, the government support for social welfare, the government role in supporting public works, the government role in promoting arts and culture for more than the few, the appointment of a Supreme Court and judges who uphold the role of "an activist" court where the Constitution is viewed as a living document, an updateable document, where the founding fathers and mothers were viewed as human and therefore fallible and improve-able, etc., etc.

Make no mistake, this was not a perfect set of policies nor were they fully coherent. But the social responsibilities toward not just individual U.S. citizens but groups, categories and classes of U.S. Americans has been the defining distinction. Societal rewards were not simply based on individual worth, ability nor effort but on an understanding of the massive disenfranchisement to the many because of the Great Depression. The social movements that gained so much momentum before WWII, pushing for the eight-hour day, social security, worker's rights, etc., advocated a public commons. FDR accommodated these movements lest he risk class warfare and the U.S. risk further embarrassment in its competition with the state communism of the Soviet Union.

The reaction we have lived the past two decades plus was soon to follow. I won't bother recounting what has happened since Reagan, culminating with Bush's so-called "compassionate conservatism." We clearly understand now that these New

Deal social benefits were recast by hardcore neoliberals as soft “giveaways” and “pandering to special interest groups.” It was time for reinvigoration and swing away from the social and towards what has been termed “personal responsibility.” Cutbacks : deregulation : privatization are the hallmarks of this new era. It links domestic and foreign policies into a coherent utopic vision of freedom and democracy. It covers for the corporatization, hence commodification, of everyday life—from our basic needs to our darkest unconscious fantasies.

Caron Atlas responds to my talk saying: “I’d like to hear more about the social agenda of arts and culture and humanities groups now and how that has shifted over the past 30 years.” I agree. This needs to be studied and the experiences of our organizations must be central to the findings. Indeed, we should research and write up what has happened. What have been the cultural policies of neoliberalism re: cultural equity, especially if racial categories are considered without class? Atlas warns: “It seems the danger in some discussions of cultural equity can be that in expecting more of the pie, that the pie itself isn’t critiqued—a neoliberal arts and culture system based on a corporate model.”

Privatizing the Public

Critic Jeremy Rifkin describes neoliberalism as “hypercapitalism” where “[t]he goal of cultural capitalism is to commodify human relationships tout court, catching them young, cultivating and servicing their every need, deploying something called R (relationship) technologies.” It is the “clean” strip mining of today’s era: “Marketing is the means by which the whole of the cultural commons is mined for valuable potential culture meanings that

can be transformed by the arts into commodifiable experiences, purchasable in the economy." (Rifkin, 171, 247) Dudley Cocke reminds us this is not beyond our control. "Hypercapitalism is not inevitable, rather it is a political enterprise which depends on state power." So the numbers I am about to cite are the product of politics not evolution or fate. In 1971, 90 percent of international financial transactions were related to the real economy—trade or long-term investment—and 10 percent were speculative. By 1990 the percentages were reversed, and by 1995 about 95 percent of the vastly greater sums were speculative." (Chomsky, 23-24) We can now watch paid television programs about speculators "flipping" old houses in the gentrifying housing market and no public talk of building houses for need.

We have the corollary in the cultural commons. Old world cultures, we know, are being viewed by conglomerates as "frontiers" of cultural practices to patent. South Asian foodstuffs such as basmati rice, the fragrant rice cultivated by farmers for millennia, for example, was patented by a Texas company. (Shiva) Even the practice of the South Asian yoga, in this money-making frenzy, is being copyrighted by eager profit seeking Indian Americans. (Mehta) All folk practices becomes a form of corporate-identifiable branding—not only what we wear, what we eat, what shows we watch, what we Web surf, what water we drink (I saw a bottle marketed by Donald Trump on the subway today), but also what vacations we take and what pills we take to relax and soon the air we breath will be transformed into an easily consumable. These are the "freeing" of common goods so their commodification can make us better and happier?

Enough of the "old" worlds, what of new cultural groups

and expressions? Jason Bulluck, mindful of those left out of "traditional" and "grounded" cultural organizations makes a critical point here.

I would challenge us to rally around newer cultures as well. What hip-hop culture has not been commodified can still be found on corners, the culture of the mass homeless remains hidden, and there are many other subaltern groups like these. These groups often lag in their ability to articulate their struggles.... Those kids on corners are a sort of perennial vegetation. Their "biomass" adds weight to arguments for equity, but their views are almost universally disregarded unless processed via the vocabularies of the more enfranchised.

Indeed, we need to be sustaining and engaging those least able represent.

We old timers must continue to be inclusive of the down and out. This is where some of the most important battles are being waged by youth and justice organizations today. Third World Majority, a women-of-color media/tech justice-training and organizing institute in Oakland, for example, is at the cutting edge of progressive media organizing. Thenmozhi Soundararajan, TWM's executive director, is a singer, filmmaker and grassroots media organizer. And she is a second-generation Tamil Untouchable Dalit woman who in India would have been at the bottom of traditional society. Being able to thrive in the relatively freer options in the United States cannot be minimized. Yet for her in this country of her birth, other fights come to the foreground. The consolidation of old media companies and the rapid contest for making money on the Internet are foremost organizing issues for her. These struggles

constitute another front of the culture wars older culturally grounded organizations tend to ignore.

Though there is much rhetoric about maintaining “family values” from religious conservatives, the unleashing of the market targets the individual and breaks down all human-to-human relationships. The purchasable commodity stands in for human relationships and social solutions. Saleable goods increasingly mediate our everyday lives. As individuated consumer citizens we work at a computer, drive our cars home and watch television in order to make enough money to consume more and more. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes the *laissez faire* idealized society as the following:

The subjects of the contemporary state are individuals by fate: the factors that constitute their individuality—confinement to individual resources and individual responsibility for the results of life choices—are not themselves matters of choice. We are all today individuals *de jure*. (Bauman, 69)

In an increasingly individuated world, acquiring more private property becomes a fetish representing “the solution” to one’s problems, unhappiness, desires. Donald Trump has become our Kitchen God and Paris Hilton our Black Madonna!

How does one get the money to buy these goods? In the legitimate, corporately sanctioned economy, one works hard and earns money. Money is to be earned, we learn early on, by disciplining one’s passions, doing well in school, and getting high test scores. Our meritocracy, operated by such monopolizing corporations as The College Board and the Educational Testing Service, has refined psychometrics to a fine art. We know it

well and half believe it is a fair, objective system. We also know it disfavors those with less cultural, educational and social capital. (Madrack) Indeed, what Lani Guinier has decreed as the "testocracy," especially now under the policy of high-stakes testing, constitutes the foundation of neoliberal policies of "color blindness." (Guinier and Sturm) As long as all individuals have the equal opportunity to test well, get into top-rated colleges, and interview well for high-paying jobs, you too can make lots of money to better enjoy the freedom of the free-price system. This is our "choice." It is "personal responsibility." W. E. B. Dubois' problem with "the color line," in their minds have been solved. There is no racism anymore. We all have de jure equal opportunity and it's up to personal choice. To punctuate the point, both Republicans and Democrats have crafted a set of immigration policies that eliminate the overt exclusions based on race and give preference to educational, cultural and socio-economic elites. The 1991 immigration reforms give strong employment preference to professional elites and those with a half-million to plow into the U.S. economy. Black, brown, red and yellow faces in high places constitute the new, "nonracist," color-blind cosmopolitanism of the new world order. Anyone can become rich (the want us to believe)! This is the core of neoliberalism at home and abroad.

This hypercapitalist utopia is the ultimate realization of the parable of Midas. Alienated, numbed white suburbanite youth work hard in school, test well, get into great colleges and get high-paying jobs in cities like Manhattan. They have always wanted to be in such places as the Lower East Side where fabled musicians such as the Ramones or their favorite hip-hop emcee who embody anti-authoritarian freedom. They and their lifestyle monies are the demographic targets of the FIRE industries, the finance, insurance

and real-estate sectors. Yet, the more they are good citizens and reinforce the corporate logic of the free-pricing system, the more they become active agents of the hollowing out of the very city in which they have invested their fantasies of filling their hollow lives. They destroy the very thing they covet. They have it all and they have nothing. Perhaps it is, consumer culture promises, just over the next horizon. If you just make a little more money....

At the same time, many neoconservatives specializing in cultural politics have taken many of former New Deal constituencies seriously. Like National Socialists in Germany and the military imperialists of Japan, they have understood feelings of dislocation and feelings of being left behind by this encroaching new system—especially those Lou Dobbs-type audiences feeling most left behind by the deindustrialization of the rust belt and searching for answers and people to blame.

Hollow selves : hollow cities : hollow cultures. Individuated and alienated, it is harder to come together and to create alternatives on what is left is of our public commons. This is top-down unfreedom, the tyranny wrought by neoliberal meritocracy.

Grassroots cultural organizations have always offered a clear alternative way of living that contests the debasement of humanity to alienated ever-grasping consumers. What have we done in the face of hyper-capitalism? We each can give witness to the social costs of this system. We each in our work and collectively can and do represent a different vision of what could be. In this outsource and commodified "choice" culture, how do we get out work out there?!

Building a Shared Cross-Cultural Commons

We individually and collectively may not have much money, but we each claim our particular cultural grounding and multiple groundings. We have what cannot be bought or sold—cultural philosophies and human resources.

One culture that I know is foundational, as a New Yorker and as an American and as a person of Chinese/Asian heritage, is the indigenous Iroquois Confederacy and Algonkian core culture practice and idea of wampum and sewant belts. On this world view I am but a beginning student. Yet it speaks to me with a clear truth. Sewant and wampum beads were made from two types of shells found between the land and the sea of Long Island Sound. These beautifully woven belts exemplify both natural bounty and great labor to produce. They represented complex sets of relationships and agreements across vast shores and woodlands. It was also appropriated and misused by Dutch and British colonials turning these symbolic exchanges into the first monetary system of the colonized territories of North America. It must be understood that wampum belts are sacred political-historical covenants of the Iroquois Confederacy. They are as sacred as the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights rolled into one. At the same time, they were expropriated and have never been fully restored to the Iroquois peoples and remain kept in a vault under the New York State capitol in Albany, N.Y.

Poet philosopher Jerry Martien of Humboldt County, California, offers a contemporary explanation. (And I also thank Tonya Connella Frichter for her insights.) With apologies to Martien's dense, layered text, I'll pull just a few basic ideas to exemplify his

contemporarizing explanation of wampum exchange:

First, "Seashells. ... A hard white surface secreted line by line from an edge of the soft mantle, using precious molecules of calcium sucked in from the sea. Protest soft flesh, and then, the shell lives on for years. Durable, smooth, hard, pale or purple or pink, ground and polished, drilled for beads. Beads in strings or belts or necklaces ... became bonds and tokens, even "messages" in a virtual language of gift and agreement. They were a key item in the ancient gift economy and its exchanges of love, land, condolences, spirit art, resistance." (Gary Snyder in Martien, vii)

Second, "The beads that maintain the gift relationship ... appear to define a chiefdom society in which all are incorporated as family members. Even though this is no buying and selling among them, the beads function as a supraeconomic form of trade," in effect a "peace-making function of exchange." (Martien 120-21, ft1)

Third. The beads embody a foundational bioregional principal. "That economy and ecology are not different, that what your money's worth and how you live are an inextricable knot, and that body and spirit fall apart and require, one by the other, constant acts of redemption." (Martien, 232)

Unlike the more hierarchic power relations of dynastic Chinese culture or the vulgar profit-is-everything god of corporate capitalism, wampum gifting practices were more horizontal, more democratic. "Except for the honor accorded to generosity, the gift is no sacrifice of equality and never of liberty. The groups allied by exchange each retain their strength, if not the inclination to use it." (Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 179 cited by Martien 121) "This is

how the accounts were kept and valuations maintained in North America. Not by the iron law, and not even the golden rule. A peace that came from the heart's will to peace. The keepers of its word answerable to the keepers of the earth." (Martien, 111)

Our culture making of the past 30 years and counting is creating the same currencies of exchange as wampum. At this moment of radical neoliberal rupture and further regimentation in the name of freedom, choice, and democracy, we make culture to remind ourselves and our communities "the source of all treasure is in the heart, which opens and is restored both in giving and receiving." (226) We create work which move between "the past and the future, redeeming the individual, the human collective, and the body and spirit of the heart's informing fit. [Our work] recounts the losses, keep the account of what's due, and make returns to the source of life and economy." (Martien, 228)

Social relationships are at the core of these human relationships. The process, the journey, living in sustainable balance with our surround—the creative process of being in the here and now—are the cores of these views. Exchange is both for survival and for meaning, not the demeaned and separated processes of living to work, working to save, saving to retire, retiring to live.

What must we do?

We're a room full of organizers.

Collectively we have the answers.

But we don't entirely know what part of the answer we each hold.

But we need to be able to share and talk and listen deeply and honestly.

As veteran cultural activists, of all ages, who have fought many battles and survived to fight smarter another day. We are clear in our activist origin stories. We have local and deep histories. We have a sense of culturally meaningful time and we have a sense of the groove of full social lives. We have communitarian places that sustain meaning-making. And we are practiced in our anticommodified, defetishizing ways of understanding our lives, our communities and our societies. We have to give much more meaning to the pursuit of happiness, to life and to liberty.

This gathering, this barn raising, is just such a rare opportunity. But we can't just do it for show. We need to really talk, to really listen, to really understand the difference between the people we know in lower Manhattan and the people you work with. Thirty years and counting of critically formulating, assessing and reformulating what works within our communities needs to be distilled. I, for one, desperately want to hear your stories and factor them into my organizational strategies and planning.

Some of us have already begun talking, so I want to share some of those ideas as a way to jumpstart our collective reflections.

Dudley Cocke has said we need to work on collaborative projects, crossing our boundaries what we do to survive everyday to expand our understandings of what we have been doing and need to do.

Arlene Goldbard has said we need to pen a "cultural bill of rights"

Tonya Gonnella Fichner has suggested we build on the strategy of indigenous people and build on the U.N. drafts of "The Rights of Indigenous Peoples"

It's been suggested we need to hold national hearings on cultural equity as related to the range of policy areas from immigration to foreign policy to funding for culture and the arts.

I can go on, and we will all now continue this brainstorming...

But let me close by saying we need to craft our own digital wampum belt—our own vision statement about cultural and cross-cultural citizenship. We need to work out fundamental questions about the equity of women and the rights of LGBTs. We need to hear and respect differences and craft our culturally grounded rights. And we need legislative and legal strategies. We need to crunch those numbers for redistricting districts of political representation. And we need to engage in debates with the neoliberal think tanks. But perhaps most important, we need to engage with those efforts to articulate a truly democratic and participatory alternative economic vision that puts our core concerns of freedom, justice and equity at the core of society.

What must we do?

We already know.

We're a room full of organizers.

As veteran cultural activists who have fought many battles and survived to fight smarter another day, we know.

First, we must come together and talk.

Second, we need to develop a shared strategy of what to do.

And, finally, we need to act individually, we need to act organizationally, and we need to act together.

It has been suggested we sponsor regional hearings or dialogues to find out what is going on the grassroots in clear, non-mass-media filtered terms. To get us started. Dudley Cocke, longtime veteran of cultural organizing in Appalachia, offers these excellent suggestions for regional, community dialogues:

What have been the social costs of hyper-capitalism in our particular communities? (Such as: rates of unemployment, dislocation, poverty, incarceration and infant mortality.)

What is hyper-capitalism doing to our sense of community—our neighborliness?

What are the psychological costs?

What damage to the ecosystem upon which we depend?

What questions would you ask in such hearings?

John Kuo Wei (Jack) Tchen is an award-winning public historian, curator and cultural activist. Since 1975, he has been studying interethnic and interracial relations of Asians and Americans, helping to build cultural organizations, and exploring how inquiry in the humanities and society can help deepen the quality of public life and policy. Tchen is the founding director of the A/P/A (Asian/Pacific/American) Studies Program and Institute at New York University, the co-founder of the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, and a member of the Sustaining Voices from the Battlefront Leadership Advisory Group.

In memory of John Langston Gwaltney and Larry Levine, esteemed activist scholars extraordinaire, noble men, and great guys. Thanks to Caron Atlas, Jason Bulluck,, Dudley Cocke, Arlene Goldbard for valued comments. Thanks for Marta Vega for fiercely keeping her "eyes on the prize" 30 years and counting.

¹ "Beyond Vietnam," address delivered to the Clergy and Laymen Concerned, April 4, 1967, Riverside Church, New York City, <http://www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/MLKapr67.html> (5.16.07).

² For a sense of this progressive cultural work see the cited work of: Arlene Goldbard, Ivan Karp, Marta Moreno Vega and Cheryl Y. Greene.

³ See the two commercials online: http://usa.visa.com/personal/visa_brings_you/advertising/index.html (accessed 6.7.07).

⁴ I thank Dudley Cocke for insisting on these distinctions.

⁵ Neoliberalism is grounded in the political philosophy of the Chicago School of Economics led by "free to be you and me" economist Milton Friedman who championed the ideas of Austrian antitotalitarian philosopher Friedrich von Hayek.

⁶ Given their profound influence, we can understand why Hayek and Friedman often credited as the most influential economics of the past century. Lest we harbor any delusions about right-wing conspiracies and being saved by the Democrats, I want to remind us that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was pushed through by neoliberal President Bill Clinton. For a provocative overview of Pulitzer Prize-winner Daniel Yergin's

analysis of economic globalization, see the PBS documentary and accompanying Yergin's book "Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy."

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/>.

⁷ Arlene Goldbard e-mail correspondence with author. June 25, 2007. For more on Goldbard's perspective see:

⁸ Caron Atlas e-mail correspondence with author. June 6, 2007.

⁹ Dudley Cocke e-mail correspondence with author. June 21, 2007.

¹⁰ One example of basic issues such as a right to quiet that are being commodified for private gain and consumption. Penelope Green, "The Dream of Absolute Quiet: You'll never get sound under control, but if you have enough money you can try." House & Home Section. New York Times. May 17, 2007, F1, 10. For the near future of customized advertising in Web surfing, see: Steve Lohr, "Your Ad Here, The dream is an online pitch, personally delivered." Small Business Section. New York Times. May 16, 2007, H1, 7.

¹⁰ King, just before his assassination was linking domestic poverty with foreign policy (the war on Indochina) and philosophical/spiritual issues (hypermaterialism).

¹¹ Jason Bulluck e-mail correspondence with author. June 21, 2007.

¹² For more on Third World Majority, see:

<http://www.cultureisaweapon.org/>

For more on Soundararajan, see:

<http://www.cultureisaweapon.org/staff/mainframe.php>

¹³ A 2004 "Artists Call for Cultural Policy" can be found at:

<http://www.petitiononline.com/art2004/petition.html>

¹⁴ I believe it would be useful for cultural activists to engage with those activists envisioning socio-economic transformations. See, for example the "participatory economy" work of Parecon folks working out of South End Press. Michael Albert, "Buying Dreams: Visions for a Better Future," <http://www.zmag.org/Parecon/writings/albertold15.htm>. (Accessed: 6.6.07).

¹⁵ Cocke e-mails with author.

Selected Bibliography

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2002. *Society Under Siege*. Polity Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998. "The essence of Neoliberalism." *Le Monde Diplomatique*. December.

_____ and Loic Wacquant. 2001. "NewLiberal Speak," *Radical Philosophy* 105, January-February, 2-5.

Chomsky, Noam. 1999. *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*. Seven Stories Press.

_____ and Carlos P. Otero. 2003 (1981). *Radical Priorities*. AK Press.

Bakan, Joel. 2004. *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. The Free Press.

Gamble, Andrew. 1994 (1988). *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*. Macmillan.

_____. 2001. "Neoliberalism," *Capitalism and Class* 75, 127-34.

Giroux, Henry A. 2002. "Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education: The University as a Democratic Public Sphere." *Harvard Educational Review* 72:4. Winter, 425-65.

_____. 2003. "Spectacles of Race and Pedagogies of Denial: Anti-Black Racist Pedagogy Under the Reign of Neoliberalism." *Communication Education* 52:3/4. July/October, 191-211.

Goldbard, Arlene. 2006. *New Creative Community: the Art of Cultural Development*. New Village Press.

Guinier, Lani and Margo Sturm. 1996. "The Future of Affirmative Action: Reclaiming the Innovative Ideal." *California Law Review*, July.

Ivan I. Karp, Christine Kreamer, and Stephen D. Lavine, eds.

1993. *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*. Smithsonian Institution Press.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. 1967. "Beyond Vietnam" Address delivered to the Clergy and Laymen Concerned, Riverside Church, New York City, April 4. <http://www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/MLKapr67.html> (Retrieved 5.16.07).

Lifton, Robert Jay. 1993. *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. Basic Books.

Lippard, Lucy. 1999. "Too Political? Forget It." *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*. Eds. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine. New York University Press.

Lubbers, R. & J. Koorevaar. 2000. "Primary globalisation, secondary globalisation, and the sustainable development paradigm-opposing forces in the 21st. century." *Quest of Humanity in a Globalising World*. Eds. W.F.C.M. Derkse, J.M. van der Lans, & S.J.M. Waanders. Damon. 2000. Dec. 6. <http://www.tilburguniversity.nl/globus/> (Retrieved Nov 27, 2005).

Madrick, Jeff. 2007. "Goodbye, Horatio Alger." *The Nation*. February 5.

Martien, Jerry. 1996. *Shell Game: A True Story of Beads and Money in North America*. Mercury House.

Mehta, Suketu. 2007. "A Big Stretch." Opinion Editorial. *New York Times*. May 7, A21.

Muller, Jerry Z. 2003. *The Mind and the Market*. Anchor Books.

Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development. 2000. *The Creative Society of the 21st Century: Future Studies*. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/41/13/35391171.pdf> (Retrieved 5/16/07).

Rai, Alexander. 2005. "Neoliberalism, Globalization, and the Commodification of Global Culture." *ETALKINGHEAD*. <http://www.etalkeinghead.com/archives/neoliberalism-globalization-and-the-commodification-of-global-culture-2005-12-16.html> (Retrieved 12.16.05).

Ranelagh, John. 1991. *Thatcher's People: An Insider's Account of the Politics, the Power, and the Personalities*. HarperCollins.

Rifkin, Jeremy. 2000. *The Age of Access: A New Culture of Hypercapitalism: Where All Life is a Paid For Experience*. Putnam/Tarcher.

Shiva, Vandana. 1997. *Biopiracy: the Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*, South End Press.

_____. 2002. *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit*. South End Press.

Snyder, Gary. 1996. Foreword in *Shell Game: A True Story of Beads and Money in North America* by Jerry Martien. Mercury House.

Vega, Marta Moreno and Cheryll Y. Greene, eds. 1993. *Voices from the Battlefield: Achieving Cultural Equity*. Africa World Press.

Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. *Gifts, Favors & Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*. Cornell University Press.

Yudice, George. 1997. "The Privatization of Culture." *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*. Eds. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine. New York University Press, 1999.

Zinn, Howard. 1995. *You Can't Stay Neutral on a Moving Train*. Beacon.

This essay is available online on the Community Arts Network website:

www.communityarts.net

Thanks to Linda Burnham for placement on the Community Arts Network website.