



NEXT RIVER

Freedom's Re·vival

Research from the Headwaters
of Liberation

A Field Guide

Freedom's Revival:

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of Liberation

A Field Guide



Mia Birdsong and Saneta deVuono-powell

NEXT RIVER AND GROUND WORKS



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About Next River

Next River is an institute for practicing the future.

Part culture-change lab, part think tank, part ecosystem builder, Next River does research that reveals solutions being practiced in the margins of our country, nurtures leaders and leadership models that point us toward our collective vitality, and recasts fundamental concepts like liberty and labor to unshackle them from the inertia of history and the status quo.

We move conversation, culture, and resources to nourish the people and communities whose ways of being, doing, and relating point us toward the audacious change this moment—and our future—demand.

Our work enables the civic engagement that builds and maintains real democracy, the leadership that pushes our workplaces and economies to evolve, the thinking and behavior that create racial, gender, and economic justice, and the culture and values that prioritize our collective well-being and longevity. We celebrate the spark of ancient wisdom and the snap of innovation.

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For our ancestors and our descendants.

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Freedom's Revival: Research from the Headwaters of Liberation

A Field Guide¹

1. Dowsing: A Prelude from Mia Birdsong

In the spring of 1866, Ms. Julie Tillory, like thousands of other formerly enslaved people, sought out the Freedmen's Bureau. At the Freedmen's Bureau, Ms. Tillory encountered a missionary. This woman (presumably white) asked Ms. Tillory why she would want to leave the "certainties and comforts of your master's plantation, where subsistence was guaranteed" for an unknown future. Ms. Tillory responded, "To 'joy my freedom."

- 1 Saket Soni:** This offers a grammar for a new conversation about freedom. Understanding it as building new grammar—if that's right—might help position it as foundational for all the conversations we need to be having about how we build a pluralist democracy where we all belong.

I read this story years ago in Tera W. Hunter's book, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War*, and was so struck by the way this encounter speaks to the reductive characteristics of racism and sexism, the limitations of comfort and familiarity, and the expansive imagination of those committed to freedom. Ms. Tillory is so clear, so precise.

The missionary questions the reasoning of a choice to, as she understands it, leave certainty for uncertainty. She sees the predictability of what is familiar as a smarter, safer choice than an uncertain future, even as that future seeks not only better, but fundamentally different uplifting and animating conditions.

The missionary, who no doubt enjoys some version of the future Julie Tillory wants to create for herself, is myopic in her lack of imagination. It would be easy, and probably not inaccurate, to interpret her perspective as being entirely informed by racism and sexism. But I believe it was more than that. The limited and limiting viewpoint of the missionary speaks to a broader relationship with uncertainty that impedes our ability to create changes and shifts that make liberatory futures possible.

Certainty versus uncertainty is, of course, a false supposition. Uncertainty is constant. (As Octavia Butler tells us, "God is change.") And it is a necessary condition of growth and transformation. But many of us hold tightly to the false certainty of the familiar current state, even if, like the plantation, it can only offer us an unfree life. We miss that through the portal of uncertainty anything is possible. And only by stepping into uncertainty, accepting—even embracing—it, can we get free. Of the many lessons of the COVID pandemic, this is one I've been particularly fixed on.

Pre-pandemic America was one in which there were wildly differing perspectives on what direction the country should move. The pandemic revealed many of the intentional limitations of our systems and structures.

These harmful designs, which show up in things like health care, governance, and education, were clear to some of us—particularly those who experience marginalization. But the pandemic further pulled back the veil,² showing many more of us that these systems were not designed to help and support all of us.

The turmoil of the pandemic was an opportunity to imagine new systems and structures, and to model them on our own abilities, however rusty and unpracticed, to support and care for each other.

And, for a time, many of us, out of necessity and inclination, stepped into that opportunity. The unabating hand of capitalism relaxed its grip on our time and energy. We slowed down.³ And in this newfound spaciousness, we decentered paid work and engaged in a more balanced life.

We found ways to take care of each other. We turned ourselves toward reading, baking, taking walks, gardening, and finding new ways to gather. We shared what we were learning about COVID safety and spread, but also the best methods for proofing bread and when to plant tomatoes. We had Zoom dance parties and

2 adrienne maree brown, July 9, 2023. “things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. we must hold each other tight & continue to pull back the veil.”

3 Significantly, groups of people who did not get to experience this slowdown were essential workers. People who maintain our food systems, sanitation workers, delivery people, and healthcare professionals, etc., were among the many who not only did not get to slow down, but, in many cases, were working more.

began many new group text threads. We worked from our kitchen tables and got new pets.

When George Floyd was murdered, we participated in uprisings and committed to learning and growth. We built outdoor altars to honor our dead. Black authors dominated the bestseller lists. Mutual aid groups—a decades-old organizing and care arrangement based on an ancient and fundamentally human practice—had a massive renaissance.

But it did not take long for demands to “return to normal” to drown out the creativity and possibility we were just beginning to explore.

Those at the center of power insisted we get back to work. We were exhausted by the relentlessness of the whole thing. Our children were suffering. Caregivers were depleted. Businesses were closing. Hundreds of thousands of our loved ones were dying. There were shortages of things we needed and wanted. The political divisions across the country sharpened. An unhinged, unpredictable demagogue was in charge (and when he wasn’t reelected, much of the country believed he had been).

Maybe it just didn’t get bad enough for a long enough time to give us the push we needed to choose something different. But we could not withstand the uncertainty. We did not have the collective resilience or social fabric to create the micro-infrastructure that could have relieved some of the very real pressures to address our material and emotional needs. We did not have a practiced and established alternative ready to put in place to help keep us moving toward those better, fundamentally different conditions.



Pre-pandemic America was far from what many of us wanted and needed. Even though the pandemic and the uprisings revealed to many more of us that what America is providing is insufficient, our collective inability to tolerate uncertainty made us long for the familiar.

So, we've returned to a version that's some semblance of what we had before. (We can never truly go back.) And here we are, again, wrestling with our ever-worsening conditions and trying for a different variation of what we already know is terrible. ⁴

It feels a little like being on a sinking boat headed toward the edge of a waterfall and trying to fix the boat instead of abandoning ship and choosing a path that takes us away from the waterfall.

a. What Does It Mean to Get Free?

American society is unfree. ⁵ The evidence of this unfreedom is structural. Our federal government is arguably run by an oligarchy. ⁶ Racial, gender, and class inequality and oppression are evident in our lived experiences and in the reams of data about who has access to basic human rights like clean air and water, housing, health care, education, healthy food, and

⁴ This is not to say that the wrestling is not necessary. It is essential. Thousands of activists and organizers are fighting back against the onslaught of threats directed by a very strategic, long-established far-right order. The lives, material conditions, and well-being of millions of us depend on this defense. But if reacting, fighting back, and defending is all we focus on, this is where we always will be—facing down the threat, focused on the enemy attacking us, continually in a defensive stance. That means we never face the future we want.

⁵ This unfreedom is not limited to the United States, but our purview for this work is rooted in the US.

⁶ John Nichols, "It's Official: America is an Oligarchy," *The Nation*, September 29, 2022.

money. The small group of haves hoard way more than they need, and the have-nots are struggling to get by.

But America is not just structurally unfree. America is culturally unfree as well, largely because our dominant narrative about freedom is a lie.

In 2018, I was researching and writing a book, *How We Show Up: Reclaiming Family, Friendship, and Community*. It's a book about how American culture and mythology about happiness and success promote isolation and disconnection, and what it looks like to return to connection and interdependence. During my research, I came across two related pieces of information ⁷—about freedom as a collective experience and process—that I couldn't stop thinking about.

The first thing was that the words “freedom” and “friendship” share the same etymological root in a Sanskrit word that means “beloved.” ⁸ I didn't know exactly what that meant, but it jived with all I had learned about humans as social, interdependent animals. The second thing I learned is that pre-1500s, someone who was enslaved was understood as unfree not only because they were in bondage, but because

7 Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery, *Joyful Militancy*. David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom*.

8 Online Etymology Dictionary. *Frie* means “to love” and its Proto-Indo-European root is *pri*, which means “to love.” It is theorized in Germanic and Celtic that this derivation developed to mean “free, not in bondage.” This piece by David Hackett Fischer, “Freedom's Not Just Another Word,” *New York Times*, February 7, 2005, is also insightful.

they'd been separated from their people.⁹ To be free was to be in a connected, caring community. To be free was to be of, and with, the interlacing fibers of life that hold us all.¹⁰

This beautiful glimmer of truth fixed itself in my mind and spirit as a lens through which I began to examine American culture and life. It brought into sharp clarity the stark contrast between a freedom that nurtured and celebrated what it means to be human and the freedom espoused by American culture.

American freedom encourages competition and a zero-sum-game mindset. It promotes an idea of strength and success located in the fallacy of doing it yourself and not asking for help. It obscures the ways in which we are nourished and protected by relying on others by replacing relationships with the exchange of capital.

9 Bridgit Antoinette Evans: Naming that family separation is a root violation, and at the very heart of the atrocity of slavery and of the decimation of Native communities, is really profound for me. It reminded me of my experience at Equal Justice Initiative Museum and Memorial in Montgomery, and the stage of the immersive journey that focuses on the domestic slave trade that occurred after the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was outlawed on this land. Families were torn apart as Black people in the North were kidnapped and trafficked down South, never to see their families again. And the agonizing search, post-emancipation, for lost loved ones. Some found, some never found.

10 The notion of slavery as being separated from community is expressed in the Yoruban legend that drinking charmed water would erase one's memory, making it easier to be enslaved and separated from community, and the establishment of legal structures made Black slaves unable to convey kinship, as their children were property. Refer to Jennifer Morgan's *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender Kinship and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*. This idea of separation from your people was central to slavery and has a longer history as a form of control. In *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wengrow suggest that "when sovereignty first expands to become the general organizing principle of a society, it is by turning violence into kinship."

In this context, we are encouraged to hoard resources so we can get what we need through transactions because we refuse to or cannot trust that we will be taken care of by others. It divides us by manufacturing scarcity, which has us building fences, installing security systems, and buying guns. It leaves us disconnected, exhausted, and anxious and then tells us: we're free. American freedom is a con that has defrauded us of our humanity for hundreds of years.

But what would America be like if we believed in and sought out interconnected freedom? How would the economy work? What would our policies prioritize? What would health care provide us with? What would education be for? How would we design our communities? How would we structure governance? What would our relationship with the earth be like? What would it *feel* like to live in that version of America? To believe in and seek out interconnected freedom, who would we have to be?

I sat with those questions as I finished my book and also through the height of the pandemic. I realized that America's obsession with individualistic freedom, which is part of beliefs and behaviors across the political spectrum, means we cannot achieve the social justice and liberatory future so many of us want.

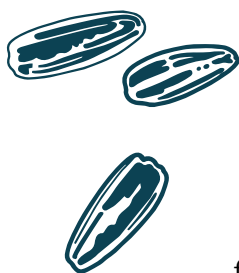
We need to get more discerning about what we mean when we talk about liberation and what it means to get free. Yes, we need to dismantle systems of oppression—racial capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy—but we also need to excavate our internalized attachments to those systems.

We need to imagine and build new systems of support and care and justice. We need to build in ourselves and among each other (human and nonhuman others) the living, breathing feeling of freedom. The absence of

oppression is not freedom. Freedom is a presence and a practice.

b. Seeding a 100-Year Strategy

Freedom's Revival: Research from the Headwaters of Liberation is a step toward that discernment. Since we started this project in the summer of 2022, we knew we wanted to provide a contribution to (re)start a conversation about what freedom is, what conditions support it, and who we need to become to be able to sustain those conditions.



While this research is a project in and of itself, it's also meant to be utilized to think and strategize about the changes that would bring interconnected ¹¹ freedom into the popular consciousness, and ultimately support a fundamental shift in America's cultural beliefs in, and aspirations for, freedom. We intend this research to seed a 100-year culture-change strategy.

Given the collective nature of the freedom we were exploring, we wanted to include other voices, not just as inspiration or points of citation, but as participants in a dialogue—participants who would have different

11 Malkia Devich-Cyril: You begin by noting that freedom has to do with connection. In doing so you are adding a third, less discussed notion of freedom that moves beyond both notions of individual and collective freedom, freedom as a function of relationship. I think discerning this as a **THIRD WAY**, needed for a **THIRD RECONSTRUCTION** might be important.

perspectives and opinions about the work. You will see their notes and comments throughout this document.

This is one of the most ambitious projects I've ever engaged in. Writing about freedom is an enormous undertaking. It's been explored and dissected for centuries, and attempting to say something new(ish) and meaningful is, honestly, intimidating. But once I began thinking about it, I couldn't not do it. This project is also one of the most fun, mind- and heart-expanding things I've worked on. Saneta and I talked almost weekly as we researched and wrote.

Each conversation thrilled, enlivened, confused, and excited us. As Black women, as mothers, and as politically radical dreamers, it has provided us with new grounding and clarity, and commitment to the generational work ahead of us.

We hope it provides our readers with something they need to deepen their relationship with our collective freedom.



2. Introduction: Navigating Freedom

At the height of the COVID crisis, over a million Americans died as people protested the inconvenience of wearing masks to protect (themselves and) others. Many of these protesters used the language of freedom to justify their refusal to take precautions recommended by public health officials.

Freedom is a concept that organizes many of the political debates in our society. And yet, what we mean when we talk about freedom is deeply convoluted. Freedom, an elusive concept central to the American imagination, plays a complicated role in many of the social problems we face.

How can a country that owns 42 percent of the world's guns, incarcerates 21 percent of the world's people, is

responsible for 25 percent of cumulative carbon emissions, and has some of the highest levels of inequality, infant mortality, and suicide rates believe it is free? How can a country that does not provide all of its residents with health care, housing, food, or child care believe it is free?

Part of the answer lies in what we mean by “freedom.” This project came out of a desire to reexamine what freedom means in the United States. It builds on the idea that our culture has adopted a convoluted definition of freedom that inhibits both our collective imagination and political will.

Freedom’s Revival is an inquiry into freedom and its possibilities. It seeks to explore the freedom that is central to all of our struggles for justice, equality, and our planet’s survival. It seeks to recover a freedom unlike the one that has taken root in the United States.¹² What would it look like to understand our freedom as stemming from a deep connectedness with other living beings? What would be possible if we understood, believed in, and practiced this freedom?

In our inquiry into how interconnected freedom is practiced, we uncovered four elements that help reimagine what freedom entails—mutuality, pragmatic faith, the experiential, and transformation. Our hope is that by engaging with this dialogue, we will find and seek ways to claim and revive the freedom that is central to humanity, one rooted deeply in an understanding that we are all connected.

12 We chose to call this project Freedom’s Revival because we are interested in reclaiming the term based on reviving earlier understandings of what freedom stood for.

a. Orientation + Methodology

Freedom's Revival seeks to excavate and explore interconnected freedom and its practices, and to articulate what is wrong with the harmful notion of individualistic freedom.

The following text reflects the complexity of our exploration. Our research involved desktop research, which included a literature review and a scan of contemporary music, art, events, and social media, which provided powerful insights and perspectives on freedom and spoke to or exemplified interconnected freedom. We explored freedom practices in conversation with activists, change-makers, and future builders.

We also did formal interviews with nearly two dozen people who have expertise we wanted to learn from. Many of the interviews are quoted in the appendix. Additionally, we asked 11 reviewers to read an early draft and provide comments, questions, and reflections for us to publish as part of the text.

We've included these comments alongside the text (in the form of footnotes with the contributor's name in bold) instead of integrating the ideas into our own thinking because it is important to make the project of Freedom's Revival one that includes many voices and offers a variety of entry points.

Our research has tried to involve and take seriously the invitation we think interconnected freedom offers, so the methodology for this has been collaborative and experimental, which informs the shape of the field guide.

Our research grew and expanded as we followed each meandering path. What we found is that interconnected freedom is not only part of our collective past, it's part of our present and future.

We discovered that interconnected freedom is everywhere and central to many formal, informal, organized, and organic social justice efforts.

From the environmental stewardship central to climate justice to the multiracial protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder, social movements build energy through embracing the idea that our individual lives are enriched when our society cares for others. As intuitive and simple as interconnected freedom seems, it is elusive.

Grasping it is hard, as the noise of individualistic freedom drowns so much out. Interconnected freedom exists everywhere but is often overshadowed by our understanding and acceptance of freedom as independence. At the end of our research period, we knew we were not done and could spend a lot more time exploring and learning. We are particularly aware of the fact that some of our greatest thinkers on this topic have not been engaged because they were doing the work, and we had a deadline. But, holding to the concept of pragmatic faith, we began analysis anyway.

We know that this work will need to continue and have tried to create a container with this text that can allow it to grow and adapt as we learn more.



To move our culture toward cultivating a new/old concept of freedom requires collective effort. We hope this is the beginning of an ongoing revival that will be informed by continued learning and exploration, disagreement, dialogue, and practice.

To interrupt the dominant assumptions and beliefs about freedom, this document combines history, narrative, and a collage of voices and stories designed to help us remember the shape of a different freedom, one that has always existed but is overshadowed by the bullying antics of individualistic freedom. ¹³ *Freedom's Revival* is organized into four main parts:

Freedom's Mirage offers some definitions and highlights about what is at stake in rethinking freedom.

Land of the Free? offers an overview of how the myth of freedom as independence has been perpetuated and resisted in our society.

Charting Escape, or Freedom's Revival lays out four central elements of interconnected freedom and provides some examples to define what interconnected freedom requires and makes possible. It also has reflection questions and rituals to elicit more understanding of each element.

The Appendix provides practices and content to both deepen your experience with freedom and enrich your understanding of it.

13 Shanelle Matthews: It's a systematic, intentional process of imbuing society with a specific ideology taught at every level of education. It is mutually dependent on other domains of power, such as institutions (e.g., religion, workplace), and normalized through interpersonal interactions.

Bridgit: YES. The idea that the US would not have a national culture, identity, and history, without the work of navigating the horrors and horrible actions of slavery is very important and this is a strong articulation of the inherent problem.

We share this exploration knowing it is far from complete. There is much more to say, and we hope that this exploration will continue and evolve.

We invite you to join us—to examine what the beliefs we hold about freedom are doing to us and the world. Consider this your invitation to recognize the ways in which we are practicing interconnected freedom and to explore what this freedom could mean for ourselves and our community.

Right now, we are in the midst of an important societal inflection point, and we hope you will join us in working to develop strategies that will move us toward a culture of interconnected freedom.



3. Freedom's Mirage

*Freedom can't be contained within a paradigm that is individualistic. One cannot be free alone: freedom is collective.*¹⁴

—Angela Davis

The idea of freedom as something that is relational and interconnected is intuitive. It is also markedly absent from how our society thinks about freedom. Contemporary public discourse on freedom tends to focus on freedom as the right to be unencumbered by a concern for others or as the right to access specific things.

In this framing of freedom, our attention focuses on what we are free to have or do without concern for others (such as carry a gun, not wear a mask, or stand

¹⁴ Jaida Sloan, “Dr. Angela Davis Speaks on Freedom and Activism,” *The Paisano*, February 26, 2021.

your ground). This notion of freedom that has endured in the American imagination is based on specific ideologies of independence and hyper-individualism.

In fact, the freedom that circulates in the US is an inherently individualistic conception of freedom that sees reliance on others as a threat—antithetical to its own existence. The American understanding of freedom is attached to being free of accountability to others; it is the freedom author Ta-Nehisi Coates describes in his essay on Kanye West:

White freedom, freedom without consequence, freedom without criticism, freedom to be proud and ignorant; freedom to profit off a people in one moment and abandon them in the next; a Stand Your Ground freedom, freedom without responsibility, without hard memory; a Monticello without slavery, a Confederate freedom, the freedom of John C. Calhoun, not the freedom of Harriet Tubman, which calls you to risk your own; not the freedom of Nat Turner, which calls you to give even more, but a conqueror's freedom, freedom of the strong built on antipathy or indifference to the weak, the freedom of rape buttons, pussy grabbers, and fuck you anyway, bitch; freedom of oil and invisible wars, the freedom of suburbs drawn with red lines, the white freedom of Calabasas. 15

There are innumerable illustrations of the lethal implications of individualistic freedom, but the debate on gun violence may be the starkest. This year, as there has been more than one mass shooting a day (484 as of September 2, 2023), many states continue to restrict attempts to regulate guns under the auspices of freedom.

15 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "I'm Not Black, I'm Kanye," *The Atlantic*, May 2018.

In the wake of a Nashville school shooting in March of 2023, lawmakers in Tennessee responded by approving a bill to protect gun dealers from liability and expelling two lawmakers from the legislature for speaking against gun violence. At the time, GOP congressman Tim Burchett probably put it best when he said of gun violence, “it’s a horrible, horrible situation and we’re not going to fix it.”¹⁶



While Tennessee’s congress refused to address gun violence, they were willing to deprive citizens of elected representation

and prevent gun manufacturers from being held responsible for deaths caused by their products.¹⁷ It is hard to make sense of this apathy toward violence, particularly when the victims of the recent tragedies in Tennessee were

constituents these lawmakers are sympathetic to.

Trying to understand our national acceptance of gun violence in light of the draconian restrictions on abortion is even more confounding.¹⁸ But if we look at the form of

16 Julia Carrie Wong, “Republican Congressman Says ‘We’re Not Going to Fix’ School Shootings,” *The Guardian*, March 28, 2023.

17 Stephanie Whiteside, “Louisville Mayor Asks State for More Freedom on Gun Laws,” *NewsNation*, April 11, 2023. This is in a state where adults are allowed to purchase and carry a firearm without a license and where police departments are required to auction any guns they confiscate from crime scenes back to the public.

18 Guardian Staff and Agency, “Florida Closes in on Six-Week Abortion Ban While Also Allowing No-Permit Gun Carry,” *The Guardian*, April 3, 2023. On the same day that Florida passed legislation restricting women’s access to the simple procedure known as abortion, Governor Ron DeSantis signed a law allowing residents to carry concealed guns without a permit.

freedom being conjured in the gun debate, the twisted logic makes sense. Only through clinging to the idea that freedom is a solo venture that takes no responsibility for others can this type of politics take hold.¹⁹

While advocacy against regulating firearms falls almost entirely on the right side of the political spectrum, some on the left also hold to their own kind of individualistic freedom. We can see how this plays out in the abortion rights movement. For many who would characterize themselves as pro-choice, as long as *Roe v. Wade* was upheld, they believed access to abortion was protected. But in reality, that access was only for those who lived in proximity to abortion providers or had the means to travel to abortion providers, had health insurance or means to pay for an abortion, could take time off work, and had the resources to pay for child care. This choice was only for individuals who were largely urban dwelling, white, or economically well-off. Individuals who had access to abortion under *Roe* could claim their individual freedom.

Reproductive justice, a movement started by Black women, is rooted in interconnected freedom, and recognizes that the right to an abortion is only legitimate if everyone has access to it—regardless

19 Ingrid LaFleur: This idea of independent freedom makes me think of the Marlboro Man.

Saket: We can't build democracy anew without building a notion of freedom at the center of it that links us to each other, reveals our interdependence, and expands our circle of mutuality. You're pointing out that we can't build a healthy democracy on a narrow definition of freedom as independence—the definition most Americans embrace.

of race, gender identity, geography, ability, and economic status. Reproductive justice functions outside of the antiabortion/pro-choice frame to include the right to have a child and the right to raise children in safe and healthy environments.

Individualistic rights do not protect people who have no access to health care, paid leave, transportation, or child care. Individualistic freedom does not include the ability to be cared for, and to be able to care for the children that are brought into this world.

Freedom as independence is the logic that distracts us from understanding, valuing, or paying attention to our quality of life.²⁰ This freedom suggests that caring for others or being cared for is a sign of weakness or deficiencies.

We see this playing out in efforts to gut child labor laws. As of August 2023, several states have passed laws allowing children to work longer hours in more dangerous conditions, including seven states that have lowered the age at which children are permitted to serve alcohol. These laws coincide with an alarming increase of children dying or being injured in work-related incidents, particularly among undocumented children.

And yet, the proponents of these laws argue that children should have a right to work, invoking individual freedom. At the same time, these states show no interest in ensuring a right to health care, education, or food.

²⁰ Derek Thompson, “Why Americans Die So Much,” *The Atlantic*, September 12, 2021. An Atlantic article on declining life expectancies in the US stated, “Let’s start with the idea, however simplistic, that voters and politicians in the US care so much about freedom in that old-fashioned ‘Merica-lovin’ kind of way that we’re unwilling to promote public safety if those rules constrict individual choice. That’s how you get a country with infamously laissez-faire firearms laws, more guns than people, lax and poorly enforced driving laws, and a conservative movement that has repeatedly tried to block, overturn, or limit the expansion of universal health insurance on the grounds that it impedes consumer choice.”

This is indifference disguised under the auspices of freedom. The idea that freedom is about strength and individuality renders people who need help weak and unworthy. ²¹

There is a distrust of humanity inherent in individualistic freedom that creates a negative feedback loop. If others cannot be trusted, relied upon, or acknowledged in our individual quests for freedom, we must work to suppress all evidence that we have ever trusted or relied upon others to affirm that we are worthy of the freedom we aspire to achieve.

When we denigrate programs such as food stamps, disability, or unemployment, we cast those who need help as undeserving. This characterization of dependency as weak makes us gloss over our own dependency and primes us to treat other people as if their worthiness is conditional, which creates an anxiety that our own worthiness is conditional. And so, it continues. ²²

This harmful idea of freedom has stymied social justice, justified inequality, and emboldened cruelty. So many policies, programs, and processes that would enhance our collective well-being are rejected through the lens of individualistic freedom. We must replace it with a notion of freedom that honors our humanity instead of denigrating it.

21 Malkia: This version of freedom also is only possible by denying rights and freedoms to some. Which negates the act and binds even those who it is meant to free.

22 Malkia: This is rooted in a global history of monarchies, dynasties, and other forms of colonial rule, which rely almost wholeheartedly on the concept that people cannot be trusted to govern themselves and require those of privilege to govern them. This intersection of economy, state, and organized religion is where the cultural notions of freedom are born and reproduced.

When we ask people to think about how they experience freedom, what being free feels like, what they invoke are things that are inherently interconnected (e.g., feeling safe, having access to opportunities, and being in spaces where one is comfortable to express themselves).

Fortunately, the idea of interconnected freedom is one that everyone who has had a caring relationship with another human or living being knows. While the memory of another freedom exists for many of us, it struggles to capture our attention.²³

23 Shanelle: Why has interconnected freedom struggled to capture our attention while independent freedom has captured our attention? Still, propaganda plays a huge role here, and it exists within many domains of power and life but namely within our economic system. Here is a quote from *Broke*:

“Since the 1970s, economic policy in the U.S. and public opinion have been dominated by a conservative economic philosophy known as neoliberalism. Neoliberalism holds that the free market can solve problems the government can’t. It redefines citizens as consumers and prizes privatization, deregulation, and individual freedom. Neoliberalism has led to massive tax cuts for the rich; the crushing of trade unions; and the privatization of public services such as energy, water, transportation, healthcare, education, and prisons. Corporations now run these services and charge rents either to people or the government for their use.

Under the new narrative of neoliberalism, our lives would be organized by the market, and each of us would become ‘bits of human capital,’ learning only to expand our own capacity to earn more. Stories that supported this narrative promoted hard work and employer fidelity and lifted up the myth of the American Dream—the fabrication that success is simply a matter of perseverance and grit, and if you wanted it bad enough, you could have it. It followed naturally from these ideas that the market was king, that there was no need for public programs, societies, neighbors, or relationships. A whole set of supporting narratives were deployed to continue to erode broad support for such programs, and most of these narratives were racist, misogynist, and classist by design. Although Black communities often received less access to social programs, they were used as a scapegoat of the new liberal order and pathologized as deficient, lazy, and undeserving—justifying poverty as the outcome of Black culture and ineptitude.”

Center for Public Interest Communications and RadComms,
*Broke: How the Nonprofit and Philanthropic Sectors are
Talking about Poverty and How We Can Do Better.*


Starting with the understanding that individualistic freedom in the West is a paranoid myth driven by the desire to avoid accountability/liability and animated by a distrust of oneself and others, we began with two lines of inquiry: ²⁴

- Who and what is individualistic freedom for?
- What is the alternative, what is the shape and texture of interconnected freedom, and what conditions does it need to thrive?

To revive the freedom that would radically transform our society toward the future we need, we have to nurture it. Finding interconnected freedom sets us on a particular course.

The course we are charting is an invocation and a provocation. It is an invocation to remember and revive interconnected freedom. It is a provocation to reject the limits of individualistic freedom as fundamentally wrong and harmful.

It is an offering to those who understand that a shared future depends on us finding ways to honor our connections with each other and the earth. We hope that this journey is liberating.



24 Saket: You're interrogating:
What if freedom as connection
supplanted freedom as independence?

4. Land of the Free?

How does one tell the story of an elusive emancipation and a travestied freedom? ²⁵

—Saidiya Hartman

There is no separation between past and present, meaning that an alternative future is also determined by our understanding of the past. ²⁶

—Nick Estes

The mythmaking of the United States centers on a terrible idea of freedom. ²⁷ ²⁸ And yet, this terrible idea of freedom has hijacked our imagination and attention so that we are often unable to conjure a more expansive version of freedom. ²⁹

²⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 11.

²⁶ Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 14.

27 Maurice Mitchell: How much is the colonial story and definition of freedom mythology? Has their definition of freedom really existed or is an aspect of the suffering and alienation of capitalism about how we attempt to live out this definition against our collaborative nature?

²⁸ Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*. Maggie Nelson, “Introduction” in *On Freedom*.

29 Malkia: Because it is propagated by force.

This idea presents an exclusive and hyper-individualistic idea of freedom as a substitute for interconnected freedom. The roots of individualistic freedom are terrible because they justified and reinforced slavery.³⁰ In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman writes, “The entanglements of bondage and liberty shaped the liberal imagination of freedom.”³¹ While bondage was constructed in opposition to liberty, the concept of liberty (for some) was deployed to justify slavery.

The inheritance of this binary that the ruling class developed to justify slavery has made it difficult for Americans to understand freedom outside of the idea of an autonomous individual’s ability to own property (and people), as opposed to one developed in relationship with other living beings.³²

The intimate connection between slavery and freedom is foundational to many of the founding fathers and co-architects of the American freedom narrative. We can see this idea in the work of Adam Smith, who famously wrote in the *Wealth of Nations* that the distinction between civilized and savage countries lies in their ability to acquire “objects of comfort”—at a time when the category of objects insisted on including people.

We also see this in the story of Thomas Jefferson, the founding father, human trafficker, and rapist whose relationship with the child he enslaved, Sally Hemings,

30 The particular strain of settler colonialism that this country was founded on was equally dedicated to the erasure of Indigenous people, which also relied on a perverse logic of individualistic freedom to justify genocide. This justification continues to play out today. Refer to *Our History Is the Future* by Nick Estes; *The Darker Side of Western Civilization* by Walter Mignolo.

31 Hartman, 202.

32 Hartman, 203.

captured public attention. Even before the mythologists were forced to acknowledge that Hemings' children were also Jefferson's, what was known about Jefferson was that he was a proselytizer for the financial benefits of owning slaves based on their ability to produce more slaves. This forced reproduction enabled Jefferson to use the profits made when he "invested in negroes" to purchase the type of individualistic freedom denied to Black people.³³

We the people was written by people who owned people.
*We the people was written for people who owned people.*³⁴

Just as Jefferson does not delve into his own role in reproducing property that can be sold, we are taught not to question how property can mean freedom, when this freedom is so contingent on the unfreedom of others. But this idea of freedom does exact a cost on those who choose to embrace it. It is not a coincidence that a country forged on violence and dispossession would develop an idea of freedom that was reactive, repressive, and pessimistic.

As Maggie Nelson writes in *On Freedom*, "That white freedom in the US was historically founded and has been subsequently maintained upon the enslavement, exploitation and suppression of nonwhite others is beyond dispute."³⁵ In this dialectic, the freedom that Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, and their colleagues developed around the logic of slavery was necessarily narrow, self-centered, and dependent on celebrating

33 Clint Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, 18. Henry Wiencek, "The Dark Side of Thomas Jefferson."

34 @dreadscottart. "We the People: Discourse and Art."

35 Nelson, *On Freedom*, 34.

particular ideas of property and ownership.³⁶ This inheritance of the freedom associated with the liberal narrative of settler colonialism continues to haunt us.

a. Individualistic Freedom

*Freedom (n): To ask nothing. To expect nothing. To depend on nothing.*³⁷

—Ayn Rand

There is a long and complex history to how freedom has been conceptualized in Western society that this paper will not get into.³⁸ For the purposes of understanding how individualistic freedom has become a central freedom of American culture, we want to draw attention to how the ideology of freedom in the US was developed and informed by the brutal logic of genocide and slavery that this country was founded on.³⁹

We also want to point out how the regressive myth of freedom as independence led many radical thinkers and activists to cede the concept of freedom to the right as

36 The Fugitive Slave Act, which allowed enslavers to pursue and recapture people seeking freedom across state lines, was passed the same year as the Freedom of Religion Act. This was during the same time as the French Revolution, which recognized the sovereignty of the Haitians while forcing them to compensate the French for their loss of capital in the form of bodies emancipated from slavery. For more, refer to *Debt: The First Thousand Year* by David Graeber and *The Black Jacobins* by C. L. R. James.

37 Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*.

38 For more on the philosophy of freedom in the West and formulations on negative and positive freedoms, refer to *The Racial Contract* by Charles Mill or “Freedom and Foucault,” by Charles Taylor. For an overview of the appropriation of freedom in contemporary political struggles, refer to Wendy Brown’s “Freedom Is a Plastic Cage.” For more on how many of the concepts explored by Western philosophy were misappropriations of freedom resulting from encounters with the rest of the world, refer to David Graeber and David Wengrow’s *The Dawn of Everything*.

39 While we are choosing to focus on the US, we do not want to imply that this history is unique, as it is a central component of colonial practices globally. For more, refer to *The Intimacy of Four Continents* by Lisa Lowe.

they reframed social movements around ideas of rights and justice.⁴⁰ This political strategy may have helped social movements gain victories, but it reinforced a narrative of individualism that limited our ability to think about other forms of freedom.

The freedom that the founders of this country celebrated is rooted in the philosophies of the Western Enlightenment, which was based on a liberal Hobbesian idea of “getting away from external restriction or influence: being unhindered, unaffected, independent”⁴¹ and centered on the mythical concept of “Man” (the imaginary rational and therefore deserving human).

Freedom in this context focused on creating contracts that protected the ability of white property-owning men to extract goods and exploit other people. Freedom was centered on the ability to acquire, exploit, and protect private property.

While this notion of freedom emerged in conjunction with colonialism and the expansion of empire, the idealized autonomous individual embedded in liberal thinking took a particular tone in the United States that is intrinsically connected to justifications for genocide, slavery, and exploitation.⁴²

40 For a robust analysis of the feminist shift from liberation to empowerment, refer to chapter 2 of *On Freedom* and “The Ballad of Sexual Optimism,” by Maggie Nelson.

41 The Institute for Anarchist Studies. Friendship is the root of freedom.

42 Jee Kim: This is a rich and important vein. We have to identify liberalism as a genetic source, intertwined with colonialism and slavery, that results in foundation concepts of freedom as we inherit it. *Bland Fanatics* is [a] good recent book that lays out the third world critique quite beautifully and incisively.

In this conception of freedom, one (man) is free to plunder and subjugate a hostile environment, creating a justification for violence. The violence then sets the stage for understanding that the freedom won is precarious because those you have subjugated remain a constant threat, requiring constant vigilance.

This vigilance is maintained by showing strength and being willing to engage in violence to defend your freedom. If you lose your property or entitlements, it is probably because you were weak and therefore undeserving of freedom. What one gains with this freedom is a fortress, or a cage. This sets the stage for a celebration of the freedom defined by individualism.

The lethal implications of individualistic freedom for those who were not deemed worthy or capable of independence are well-known. It justified forced sterilizations of women who were poor, or not white, or designated as mentally incompetent.

It was used to separate Indigenous families and send their children to Indian schools, and it is why we still prefer criminalization of people with drug addiction over lifesaving policies like harm reduction. What is less obvious is how the persistence of this myth of freedom continues to restrict all of us. ⁴³

43 Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us*, endnote.

Scholar Saidiya Hartman writes of the formerly enslaved and their descendants, “With the advent of emancipation, only the most restricted and narrow vision of freedom was deemed plausible.”⁴⁴ This is true not just for Black people in America, who were subject to the particular terrors of an unmetabolized emancipation, but it also becomes the foundation for a claiming of the paranoid freedom that Ayn Rand celebrates.⁴⁵

From the founding of this country under the mantle of freedom to today, the idea of freedom that has been promoted and largely accepted within this country harkens back to the tough, go-it-alone, defensive posture that our culture celebrates in Horatio Alger’s stories, Western movies, and the presidency of Donald Trump. According to this narrative, our freedom is ours because we kick ass, because we are strong, and we deserve our freedom because we earned it.

This framing sets us up to see relationships as weak and irrelevant. This logic informs our decision to reject student loan forgiveness despite the fact that our economy would benefit from a populace with less debt.⁴⁶

In the land of narrow freedom, we measure how well systems work by our individual access to the things we want, often in contrast to those who have less. Individualistic freedom offers the “wages of whiteness”

44 Hartman, xxxiii.

45 Douglas Rushkoff, “The Super-Rich ‘Preppers’ Planning to Save Themselves from the Apocalypse.” We can see the apostles of Ayn Rand’s freedom clearly in the rise of apocalyptic tech preppers.

46 Chris Arnold, “Forgiving Student Debt Would Boost Economy.” Rose Khattar and Zahir Rasheed, “Canceling at Least \$10,000 of Student Loan Debt Will Help Lower the Cost of Living.”

as a substitute for dignified living.⁴⁷ The pessimistic, individualistic freedom is embodied in the holiday that explicitly conflates freedom with independence, known as the Fourth of July.⁴⁸ It builds on the myth of the rugged individual, who needs no one, and fuels our loyalty to the idea of a meritocracy.

Individualistic freedom is cruel because it perpetuates the notion that our failures and successes are ours alone rather than the outcome of unequal systems and because it denigrates relationships as weak. Individualistic freedom fails to make us free, instead making us untrusting and afraid of each other and our own vulnerabilities.

Although the branding of freedom as rooted in hyper-individualism has been an ongoing American project, our history is full of other forms of freedom that were sought by people who fought for a broader vision of what this country should be.

The individualistic freedom that developed in the wake of slavery and expanded in the twentieth century was not only weak in terms of the ideas and values it contained, but also in the vast majority of people it excluded. Unsurprisingly, many of those who were excluded from individualistic freedom found other forms of freedom.


47 W. E. B. Du Bois famously wrote about the psychological wage that whiteness provided to poor whites to distract them from political and material exploitation. This idea permeates our construction of individualistic freedom. Du Bois's essay "Black Reconstruction" inspired the book *Wages of Whiteness* by David Roedigger.

48 In the national mythology of the United States, the genesis of American freedom is intertwined with independence, and independence is understood as the source of freedom.

These alternative freedom practices help us create a counternarrative, providing insight into what a richer, more inclusive, and interconnected freedom looks like.

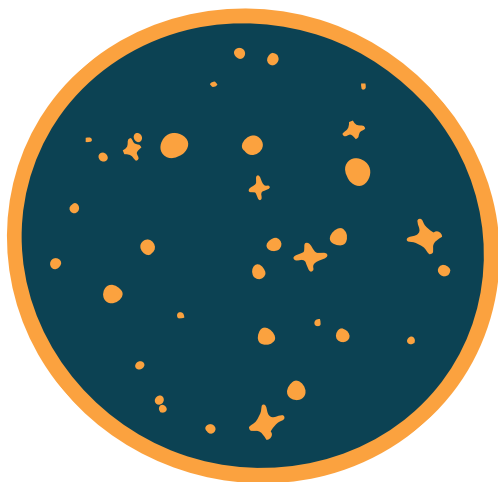
INDIVIDUALISTIC FREEDOM IS:

- * transactional;
- * rooted in racial capitalism;
- * adverse to accountability or liability;
- * exclusionary;
- * hyper-vigilant;
- * an individualistic model;
- * inherently isolated;
- * defensive/protective;
- * the result of a broken society; and
- * deeply damaging as it deforms relationships and alienates us from ourselves, others, and humanity.

A large, abstract graphic in the top left corner of the page, composed of several overlapping, organic shapes in various shades of teal and blue. The shapes are fluid and somewhat reminiscent of a stylized map or a series of connected paths.

**THE UNFREE
ARE PERCEPTIVE
TEACHERS OF
FREEDOM'S
MEANING. ⁴⁹**

FREDERICK DOUGLAS



5. Charting Escape, or Freedom's Revival

In *Making Kin*, Patty Krawec writes, “helping us reclaim our interconnected histories will take us to a place of becoming good relatives.”⁵⁰ Although our country was founded on building and amplifying a myth of individualistic freedom, our history is full of the people for whom individualistic freedom was never intended, and who have therefore claimed and defined their own freedom experiences.

This is and has been the work of freedom fighters and practitioners who seek out something that allows us to embrace our full humanity. Those who have been explicitly and implicitly excluded from the freedom-making myth of this country point us to another freedom, as do those who reject the narrow confines of individualistic freedom. These freedom practices are pervasive if we pay attention.

⁵⁰ Krawec, *Becoming Kin: An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future*.

Looking at the fugitive, stolen (sometimes labeled “defiant” or “deviant”) freedoms practiced in this country can help us articulate the assumptions, practices, and possibilities that interconnected freedom provides. What would it look like if we rejected the narrow freedom pushed onto us? ⁵¹

Throughout our history and today, many people have cultivated their counternarrative of freedom, both as a concept and in practice. From the freedom claimed by Harriet Tubman as she fought to help others escape slavery, to the freedom envisioned by the

51 Maurice: One of the tensions I feel humanity is attempting to manage in modern life is embedded in this dialectic. On one side of the spectrum are the desires of the collective and the needs of the “clan,” and on the other side are the wants and urges of the individual. “Traditional societies,” for the most part, wrestle with the problems inherent in prioritizing the collective over the individual. Modern Western societies under neoliberal capitalism are dealing with the consequences of a society that privileges the needs of the individual. There are aspects of both that can lead to deep alienation and suffering. What is the definition of freedom that synthesizes the best of both? What forms of freedom can prioritize the common good and acknowledge and allow for the expression of the “specialness” of the individual? Without being a part of one, my hunch is that the “intentional community” experiments popular in the late ’60s and early ’70s was a rebuke of the hyper-individualism of American society. Many of them did not last because of some of the ways collective life can lead to groupthink, abuse, and excesses. So how do we learn from those lessons in building a collective ethos that also honors the rights and desires of the individual?

Water Protectors of Standing Rock, a freedom that embraces interconnection is visible.

This freedom asks something of us as individuals and communities. It also offers another vision for how we can sustain ourselves and each other. These freedom practices and practitioners provide a platform that we think can help us cultivate the conditions that will support Freedom's Revival.

What follows are four elements that surfaced as we read, listened, and communed with others to find out what those who understand interconnected freedom know.



These elements are rooted in: (1) **mutuality**, (2) **pragmatic faith**, (3) **the experiential**, and require embracing our individual and collective (4) **transformation**.

These elements are overlapping and related, but each of them was present in some combination wherever we encountered interconnected freedom. They show up in both individual and collective freedom practices. They are present in our country's past and present. Exploring them helps orient us toward new ways of understanding the freedom we seek to revive.

Below we describe each element and provide a brief definition and some examples that help to illustrate what they look like in practice. We also have questions for reflection and exercises to bring the elements to life. We encourage you to engage with the questions and exercises individually and with others. In our own exploration, we have found that when we are able to reflect with others, it brings more to light. The appendix holds more examples and descriptions of each element. ⁵²

52 Saket: You're unpacking the liberatory ethos we *do* want at the center of our efforts to build a new multiracial democracy. This is incredible work, valuable work. And we have been building this kind of freedom ourselves for so long as human beings, and it's so deep in nature, that when we start to do it again, we feel like we are coming home.

a. Mutuality

Nobody is free until everybody is free. ⁵³

—Fannie Lou Hamer

Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation, we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination. ⁵⁴

—bell hooks

Deciding we are in fact accountable frees us to act. ^{55, 56}


—Aurora Levins Morales

53 Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (eds.), “Nobody’s Free Until Everybody’s Free.”

54 bell hooks, “Love as the Practice of Freedom.”

55 Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals*.

56 Heather McGhee: I’m very interested in the context of this quote, particularly because the lack of accountability seems like a big aha in the fragile freedom ... this moment of rich white men using “freedom” to evade accountability feels very resonant. Gun freedom feels like the most final of those lawless freedoms.



*We miss that
through the portal
of uncertainty
anything is possible.
And only by stepping
into uncertainty,
accepting—even
embracing—it, can
we get free.*

Rather than cutting off our roots because we are ashamed or afraid, we can reimagine the relationships we have inherited and we can take up our responsibilities to each other. ⁵⁷

—Patty Krawec

Mutuality ⁵⁸ reflects a central theme of interconnected freedom—that embracing the richly relational experience of being human supports our ability to access what we need. This relationality is not extractive or imposing, it is grounded in a collective that nurtures the whole. In this circle, each member contributes what they are able and willing to contribute, knowing that others are doing the same.

⁵⁷ Patty Krawec, *Becoming Kin*.

58 Maurice: What are the definitions of freedom that promote organizing and building collective power versus this idea that your best bet is to keep your head down and look out for yourself at the exclusion of others? This also is a core belief of organizing—the idea that the more you become acquainted with freedom the more you are “in motion” and actively involved in a larger political project.

Malkia: Since relational mutuality is a distinct element, it might be worth distinguishing it a bit here. Say up front here what you mean by “collective.” This is not just about relationships but about the group as a unit of survival. Shared experience, grouped together not by identity but by framework/vision, allows us to emphasize group rights, and build new legal models and interpretations, new approaches to economy, and civil infrastructure. Also, the concept of linked fate emerges from the collective enterprise. It proposes new ways of thinking about history and future as a group experience.

Imagine a community potluck and the many roles there are to fill. Some people host, some stay at the end to clean up. Some spend hours cooking a big pot of soup or roasting a chicken to bring. Some provide beverages. There might be someone who shows up with just a sleeve of Oreos, or two cans of beer, or nothing at all.

But the practice of mutuality means there is enough for everyone, it fosters abundance. It's understood that not everyone has the same resources and abilities. The person who brought Oreos may play music for those gathered, or entertain the kids, or maybe they spent the week caretaking and didn't have the time or energy to do more than show up. Or maybe they don't ever have the energy or capacity to contribute to the potluck, but they are understood as worthy just because they are a member of the community. Their contribution is belief in the collective, and faith that their needs will be taken care of.

The commitment to the collective—which includes ancestors, descendants, and other forms of life on this planet—informs how people have cultivated freedom practices. There is a pragmatism to this idea of the collective, rooted in an understanding that the rugged individual is a lie, that survival of the fittest is more likely to mean effective collaboration than ruthless individualism.⁵⁹

But the commitment to the collective is not simply about knowing that we need each other. It is more than knowing, as Dr. King said, “we must all learn to live together, or we'll all die together.” It is about valuing the relations we have and understanding that relationships and connection are

59 Ken Thompson, “Cooperation Not Competition Underpins Evolution.” There has been a proliferation of research refuting the idea of competition as the key to evolutionary success, much of this research centers collaboration.

essential to the human experience. ⁶⁰ For interconnected freedom to thrive, mutuality must be rooted in our relational practices and principles.

Mutuality asks the individual to hold oneself accountable to the world. It supports individuals' agency and enables them to act, instead of being passive subjects of the world. It allows for coalitions based on a sense of future possibility; it asks us to show up for ourselves and each other. It requires us to act with care for the present and future. As Prentis Hemphill says, the connection that sustains the collective is “about a particular quality of connection, which requires intentionality, which requires time.” ⁶¹ There is an accountability and individual agency in mutuality. You are a participant who contributes to the collective.

To be in a space that feels secure, you have to care for those around you, which means knowing that you are capable and worthy of taking and receiving care. ⁶² Mutuality is built on a belief and commitment to the practice of care for yourself and others.

Collectively, mutuality asks society to value and care for all of us, it fosters relationships that make you feel secure,

⁶⁰ Simone Schnall, et al. “Social Support and the Perception of Geographical Slant.” A study on psychosocial resources showed that people found a hill to be less steep when they were with someone who was supportive rather than someone they felt neutrally about.

⁶¹ From an interview conducted on January 18, 2023.

62 Heather: The pop culture story this evokes for me is the zombie team.

valued, and seen without judgment. It's not the reciprocity of getting out what you put in, but a system in which what has been put in by all of us gets to be shared by all of us.

Mutuality is about how we show up for ourselves and each other. ⁶³ Mutuality is how you form a collective that feels safe and can produce joy and vision.

Unfortunately, in a society dominated by individualistic freedom, most people have been exposed to many events and traumas that make it hard to feel safe entering a space of relational mutuality. This is why pragmatic faith and transformation may need to be cultivated to practice relational mutuality. It is also why it can take a crisis or catastrophic event for many communities to experience mutuality. ⁶⁴

63 Malkia: This feels like an emotional experience. Other elements feel material or somatic. I think being clear about the different planes on which these elements exist would prevent them from being compared to one another (i.e., some have profound historical documentation while others don't). Fanon speaks so profoundly of the emotional experience of colonialism, it is a valid plane one frequently manipulated, it is the narrative plane and might benefit from some of that analysis.

64 Rinku Sen: Disasters change everyone's orientation—hoping how to maintain this mutuality post-recovery (such as recovery may be in this society) might come up in this anthology. If not, maybe expand a little here.

Saket: I've experienced this many times in my own work after disasters. In the aftermath of hurricanes and fires, communities lock into a kind of dance that doesn't feel like it needs learning—an innate mutuality seems to start humming and people follow, and cooperate, and build friendships to solve problems together.

Mutuality in Practice

Freedom Rides

The Freedom Rides organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) are well-known as part of the activism of the civil rights movement.

In choosing to recruit white students from preeminent colleges to help register Blacks to vote, the organizers and participants knew that they were risking their lives but believed there was an essential role for whites to play in broadening collective concern about the violence against Blacks in the South. Many of the participants credit their experience with changing their understanding of and commitment to fighting racism in the US. As Diane Nash reflects on their trainings, she notes how they would practice:

... how to protect each other if, if one person was taking a severe beating. We would practice other people putting their bodies in between that person and the violence. So that the violence could be more distributed and hopefully no one would get seriously injured ... I was really afraid. The movement had a way of reaching inside me and bringing out things that I never knew were there. Courage and, and love for people. It was a real experience to be among a group of people who would put their bodies between you and danger. And to love people that you worked with enough that you would put yours between them and danger.⁶⁵

65 Interview with Diane Nash, *Eyes on the Prize*.

Standing Rock

Standing Rock was a protest movement that began in 2016 in opposition to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline through Native American tribal lands in North Dakota.

The movement brought together Indigenous people across different tribes and allies to protest and protect the land and waterways, and to call attention to the ongoing struggles of Indigenous communities in the face of environmental exploitation.

The gathering of Water Protectors was sustained by people around the world who sent a wide range of support. For people who spent time at Standing Rock, part of the power of the experience was the practice of care experienced at the camp, sustained by a broader community. One participant reflected:

Thousands were growing, healing, and becoming, constantly. Relatives who battled depression beamed with energy in camp, and youth who were otherwise withdrawn suddenly operated with an obvious sense of purpose. There was truly a job and a place for everyone. You simply had to show up and then give it your best ... At Oceti Sakowin, for so many youth, and adults alike, virtually every one of their most basic needs was being met and, consequently, individuals were motivated, prompting them to offer up their best skills and talents for the good of the community. This was a community that each individual relied on, for food, shelter, safety, love, and belonging, and, conversely, the community relied on them too. Each individual was valuable and necessary, and they knew it. ⁶⁶

66 Sarah Sunshine Manning, “Most Schools Stifle Indigenous Youth.”

Mutual Aid Societies

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Black and immigrant mutual aid societies helped poor people pool resources to take care of each other by providing for things like health care, food, and cash for funerals, rent, and other needs.

Through pooling resources, communities were able to provide a social safety net, premised on the idea of people giving what they can and getting what they need. Mutual aid is predicated on a commitment to the collective and has a long and strong history of practicing the sort of collective care and accountability that facilitates interconnected freedom.

During COVID, mutual aid became a central form of assistance for many people who lost employment, particularly undocumented workers. The contributions made through mutual aid are not transactional, it is grounded in the idea that we are all valuable and entitled to care. It suggests a form of freedom that can be accessed when a group of people agree to be responsible for each other.

As one person wrote in response to mutual aid donations in New York, “These past few months have been challenging for this family member going through the tension of being undocumented in this land and of being often rejected by family members for their queer identity. This funding is more than money, it is like a hug to let them know they are seen and loved.”⁶⁷

⁶⁷ @churchofmat, “Church of MAT HQ (@churchofmat),” accessed January 29, 2023.

b. Pragmatic Faith

My people are free.

—Harriet Tubman

Revolutionary action is not a form of self-sacrifice, a grim dedication to doing whatever it takes to achieve a future world of freedom. It is the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free. ⁶⁸

—David Graeber

Prophets and prophecies do not predict the future ... they are simply diagnosis of the times in which we live and visions of what must be done to get free. ⁶⁹

—Nick Estes

An expansive register of minor gestures, ⁷⁰ ways of sustaining and creating life, caring for one another ... communal dreaming, sacred transport, acts of redress, and faith in a power greater than master and nation made it possible to survive the unbearable while never acceding to it. ⁷¹

—Saidiya Hartman

68 Warren Breckman, “Can the Crowd Speak?”

69 Estes, *Our History Is Our Future*, 14.

70 Rinku: Subtle acts of inclusion.

71 Hartman, xxxii.

Pragmatic Faith speaks to knowing that our future needs will be met by the collective while also facing and attending to the tangible needs of our present.

Pragmatic faith is prefigurative, grounded, and utopian at the same time.⁷² Pragmatic faith shows up in things as large as abolition, as small as planting a vegetable, or as immediate as a child learning to walk.⁷³ Pragmatic faith comes up when people talk about the relationships and experiences that inspire them. “Faith” is a fraught term in our secular society, but it reminds us that all of our actions have implications and that there is a hope we can lean into without knowing the future is certain. It is what Herb Kohl called “the discipline of hope.”

Prefigurative: At the individual and collective level, the prefigurative states that there is a vision of another way, and we are going to move toward it while taking care of each other right now. ⁷⁴This is the clear-eyed recognition of where we are without accepting that we need to stay here.

72 Malkia: This feels like a good place to nod to the whole genre of speculative freedom fiction, music, and other forms of culture that reach for a future while acknowledging the present.

73 Bridgit: Feels like it could be helpful to reference Octavia Butler’s *Earthseed* writings.

74 Malkia: Some call this a vision for then, a strategy for now.

As José Esteban Muñoz suggests, the “present is provincial,”⁷⁵ meaning the logic of today is so encompassing it can be hard to see past it.⁷⁶ We need to work hard to think and create outside the logic of the present.

Grounded: Pragmatic faith acknowledges the present realities and meets them without accepting them as unchangeable or natural. This is the long arc, the mountaintop, the keeping an eye toward a future we may not live to see.

Sustaining this long arc means we need to take care of each other and ourselves in the present. This is what abolition feminism refers to when they assert that meeting the necessary transformations of the future requires addressing the violence of today.⁷⁷

Utopian: Pragmatic faith is about believing in other possibilities, seeing a future that defies the logic of today. Throughout history, pragmatic faith has animated collective acts such as abolition, acts of immigration and migration, and creative works of science fiction.

Those who refuse to forfeit their vision of an alternative future to the narrowly self-interested arguments about

75 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

76 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

77 Angela Davis, et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*.

the way things are and have always been are freedom fighters. This doesn't mean denying the present, it means seeking something outside its logic. Pragmatic faith allows us to time travel, being both grounded in the now and able to see the limits of the space we currently occupy.⁷⁸ It involves what Audre Lorde refers to when she says, "if you can't change reality, change your perceptions of it."⁷⁹ Pragmatic faith changes the dynamic of the collective because it changes our perception of what we are capable of doing.⁸⁰

78 Heather: I get the question "how can you be hopeful?" literally every time I speak. I think it's no accident that the great Black leaders have had hope as a brand ... ("keep hope alive," "hope and change," "we shall overcome"). It's essential to the Black politic. In this context, it is the hope of interdependence, of the time traveler, knowing that whatever righteous thing you are working on will be taken up by the community in your time and by your descendants in theirs ... You will chip at this wall not knowing if you will see the other side but knowing that somebody will, and they will because of the marks you made ...

79 Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 18.

80 Rinku: This is the most important aspect of changing our perception of reality. If we see reality as beyond our control (outside of perception), then we also miss seeing our assets clearly, changing our perception of ourselves as powerful actors.

Pragmatic Faith in Practice

Abolition

The abolition movement has always been one that is concerned with envisioning a new future and attending to the needs of the present. From its roots in seeking to end slavery to the contemporary movement to abolish the prison industrial complex, abolition refuses to choose between the future and past. Those early abolitionists knew that they were in a long struggle and while they sought a future they might not live to see, they also engaged in the conditions of the present. Today's abolitionists frame their work as a continuation of the work that began to combat slavery. As Sarah Haley writes, "Abolition's temporality is the present continuous—the tense of a project that is ongoing and incomplete. It is also the subjunctive—the expression of what might be, what could have been, desire. As a concept, abolition addresses the vexing entanglements of past, present, and future; it insists on necessary transformations yet to be actualized."⁸¹ By engaging in a future that does not yet exist, abolition work forces a different perspective on the present. Abolition embodies pragmatic faith in its ability to offer a clear critique of the present that refuses to concede that our current systems are inevitable.

81 Sarah Haley, "Abolition."

Black Lives Matter

The rallying cry of #BLM is also an aspirational critique of a society where Black lives are undervalued. By making a claim that is both a hope and demand, the organizers have brought attention to the need for Black lives to matter, willing a new future from the conditions of the present. Like many movements, there is a piece about addressing an immediate issue but also about so much more than that, calling on us to examine the ways in which we devalue Black lives. We live in a society that devalues Black lives structurally, physically, and psychically. This devaluation is so ingrained that a statement like “Black Lives Matter” is inherently disruptive. The assertion is both a promise and aspiration, but the backlash against it reminds us of how far we are from valuing Black people. This disruption moved many white people to reexamine their own conceptions of race and racism. Black Lives Matter makes us see where we are today. It also says “this is what I want today and this is how I build the future Black people need.” The statement is grounded, uttered by those who care about Black people, and utopian, as the backlash against the phrase highlights how far we are from a world where this could be heard as a matter-of-fact statement.

The Experiential

Freedom, like love and beauty, is one of those values better experienced than defined. ⁸²

—Orlando Patterson

Part of the experience of Black fugitivity is seeing and making joy in the temporary. So, if you find any pocket of happiness, savor it. Be extra about it. It's fuel to carry us to the next time. ⁸³

—Takiyah Nur Amin

Freedom is integration of ourselves, so much of western thought is about separating our heads from our bodies. ⁸⁴

—Alexis Pauline Gumbs

We must be free not because we claim freedom, but because we practice it. ⁸⁵

—William Faulkner

The Experiential moves us away from things we can quantify and toward the quality of what we feel and know. Attention to the experiential allows us to attend to the embodied and the somatic. It opens the heart and senses.

The texture of the experiential, or felt experience, often comes up when people talk about interconnected freedom. This is different from individualistic freedom,

82 Orlando Patterson, *Freedom Volume I*, 1.

83 Amin, Takiyah Nur. “Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin Quote.”

84 From an interview conducted on October 12, 2022.

85 William Faulkner, *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters*.

which is often about pursuits based on fabricated scarcity or not having to be accountable.

Individualistic freedom creates a false tension between individual needs and collective well-being. It refuses to invest in the conditions necessary for us all to experience our bodies and beings as valued, worthy of rest, and worthy of pleasure, and then distracts us from noticing what we feel.

The experiential often takes over when we are in deep presence with each other or the planet, or in an alignment that can feel like meditation, harmony, joy, or ecstasy. It can also be intense feelings of sadness or emotional discomfort, especially if those feelings have been waiting to be felt.

Falling into the rhythm of our body,⁸⁶ focusing on the everyday practices that sustain and create life, or the novel occurrences that spark our creativity and capture our attention, reminds us that freedom is a state or practice. It exists where it is experienced.

Many people describe freedom in moments where they are in a flow state that comes when dancing at a nightclub, walking in a forest, holding an infant, or deep in the zone of a creative process. In these moments, people describe feeling wonder, alignment, and a deep sense of being present.

86 Some people—those who experience chronic pain, for example—do not find grounding or liberation by being present to their bodies. The invitation to bring attention to sensations in the body doesn't work for everyone.

Like joy, love, and grief, interconnected freedom is recognizable when it is experienced, but hard to describe fully and almost impossible to measure.⁸⁷ How do we make space for something that resists quantification? In part, we need to pay attention as we retrain our attention to a different type of knowing and feeling.

We are often too distracted and untrained to pay attention to what we feel, what our bodies know, what our spirits crave, which means we need to clear space.⁸⁸

A focus on the experiential is what is described in moments of great intimacy, in moments as big as the aftermath of birth and death, or as minor as a gesture. The experiential often helps us lean into the unknown.

When we cannot control an outcome or are doing something new and unfamiliar, paying attention to the world around us and being present to ourselves and our connections can help orient us. In this way, tending to the experiential helps us move through and toward transformations. By allowing space to ask ourselves (and each other) how we feel, where we feel, and what we notice in the world around us, we build a muscle that changes who we are and what we attend to.

87 Kyp Malone: “Love” is as difficult a word as “freedom,” but I agree. Love is not easy in collective action, in the interpersonal, or familial. It is difficult to navigate this life in love, but I like the idea of love being a motivating factor that would compel us to work toward collective freedom.

88 Tracy Van Slyke: This is DEEP and has many layers. It feels a little too easy to say we “are distracted”—we are actually trained to act in an opposite way due to patriarchy, capitalism, racism, so to break those practices that are cultivated within those systems and start new practices is a big deal.

The Experiential in Practice

Spiritual Conference for Radical Faeries

The Radical Faeries is a network of countercultural communities that emerged in the 1970s, promoting queer spirituality and celebrating the diversity of gender and sexual identity. Through gatherings, the group celebrated freedom, community, and environmental stewardship in ways that were transformative for participants and contributed to a legacy of queer activism and cultural expression.

The Radical Faerie gatherings were an immersive encounter of what gay liberation could feel like, an embodied and collective visit “to the mountaintop.” In testimonials from the Radical Faerie gatherings, participants describe how they were able to tap into a connection with each other and the sense of liberation gained in a space where what was felt and experienced took priority.

As Don Kilhefner wrote:

There was no rigid, preplanned structure built into the gathering. The content was primarily allowed to emerge from the participants. For three exciting, inspiring, and growing-edge days, we shared our gifts and talents with each other. For three days we spent time together and talked with each other as gay men rarely had done before.

There were no rules of correct behavior. Two men might be making love at one end of the pool area while at the other end Murray Edelman would be facilitating a workshop called ‘A Different Night at the Baths.’ After lunch one day, a group of about 40 men spontaneously carried buckets of water into the desert to make pools of mud with which

they covered and anointed each other with love, caring, and sacred chanting.⁸⁹

Pleasure Activism

The theme of pleasure activism is explicitly taken up in adrienne maree brown's book of the same name. The embodied ideas behind it are also explicitly embraced in Tricia Hersey's Nap Ministry.

These authors, along with other contemporary thinkers such as Prentis Hemphill, Jenny Odell, Jaron Lanier, and Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, offer a reminder that the human experience cannot and should not be reduced to what can be quantified, that we are not machines to be optimized and that pathways to interconnected freedom lie in opening up to what our bodies and minds experience.

Many of the people steeped in collective work tend to gloss over the fact that each of us resides in our body. We are taught to ignore our body, denigrate pleasure, and act as machines to be optimized under capitalism. These authors are asking us to change our relationship to what our body is, demanding a different context for how we think about the work of being human and the work of changing the world.

89 Don Kilhefner, "The Radical Faeries at Thirty."

d. Transformation

There is no easy walk to freedom anywhere. ⁹⁰

—Nelson Mandela

Nobody's free without breaking open. ⁹¹

—Ocean Vuong

As human beings, we have a sacred connection to one another, and this is why enforced separations wreak havoc on our Souls ... Self-determination is both an individual and collective project. The fact of the matter is there is no other work but the work of creating and re-creating ourselves within the context of community. ⁹²

—M. Jacqui Alexander

Taken together, mutuality, pragmatic faith, and the experiential help bring our attention to interconnected freedom. Although each of these elements are present where interconnected freedom exists, they are not always easy to practice in the land of individualistic freedom. In fact, for many people they may be impossible to conjure, especially alone. This is why the last theme is transformation. ⁹³

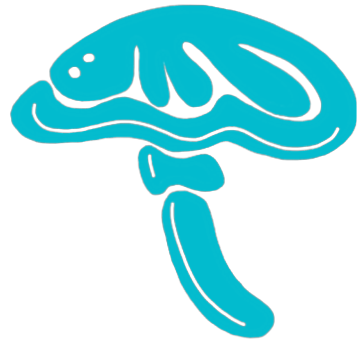
⁹⁰ Ato Quayson, *No Easy Walk to Freedom*.

⁹¹ Ocean Vuong, *Time Is a Mother*.

⁹² M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*.

93 **Jee:** I love these concepts, on their own, and in combination. These ideas, qualities, form an almost impressionist picture of the freedom we desire.

Transformation. Building on the previous elements, transformation makes space for recognizing that collectively we are not (yet) the people we need to be to sustain interconnected freedom. It goes beyond the concept of searching for a cure or fixing, it requires a process that often doesn't feel good but offers something that we need, as individuals and a society, to thrive.



In the United States, the transformation needed to get us to recognize interconnected freedom requires individual and societal healing, repair, and growth. Transformation in this context asks us to move toward something we are not yet but might one day be. The healing is about grappling with the grief and loss of our individual and collective traumas and pain experiences. The repair is a commitment to our own wholeness and to making amends for harms we or others have caused.

It's about atonement for the collective harms caused by systems, the state, and humanity. It is often easier to ignore the hurt and grief of the human experience, and we inhabit a country that offers seductive distractions. Healing is hard.

In *Brilliant Imperfection*, Eli Clare writes, "I think about how we might bear witness to the body-mind loss while also loving ourselves just as we are right now."⁹⁴ Bearing witness (mutuality), recognizing where we are without accepting the conditions that are oppressive (pragmatic faith), creates space. It allows us to feel (the

94 Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 60.

experiential), instead of glossing over, our injuries and needs and vulnerabilities. ⁹⁵

If we recognize that we are not who we want to be, then we make room for the space that transformation requires. This is what Lama Rod Owens refers to as “consenting to freedom and healing, which starts by disidentifying with unfreedom.” ⁹⁶ The journey of consenting to freedom is deeply personal, but it is also, in part, collective. It is easier when we have support from others.

This transformation away from unfreedom or individualistic freedom toward interconnected freedom requires a vision and a willingness to change. Often when we talk about transformation, we gloss over how hard change is.

The story of Harriet Tubman reminding anyone who agreed to embark on the path to freedom with her that they would be killed if they tried to turn back is a sharp reminder that few of us are always willing to do what it

95 Malkia: Reparations I feel this! I would add though that while there may not be a specific outcome, redressing harm is. But it creates the conditions necessary to feel seen and secure, and to engage the other elements embedded within a material reality, not just an emotional one. “Healing” as a term often connotes a shift in emotional landscape, but in this context, I believe it requires structural and narrative shifts, redress of harms, and is a place to nod to reconstruction and reparations.

Saket: So much here in this exquisite insight. I wouldn’t put in terms of broccoli and candy at all. Witness bearing has given us easily one-half of the world’s poetry (if romance has given us the other half) and so much collective trauma and violence has produced poets of that trauma and violence because we want the space to grow something new—space only deep witness can create.

⁹⁶ From an interview conducted May 23, 2023.

takes to get free. In committing to freedom, we have to shed who we have been, and every change involves loss.

If you have become a parent, lost a loved one to death, fallen in love, or ended a significant relationship, you may know something of what transformation is. If you've had effective therapy or political education, you know what it is like to release an old version of yourself to make way for a fundamental shift. These, and so many other experiences, give us insight into what it means to deeply change.

For many people, it is painful to consider that we could operate in different ways because we are attached to our experiences, however terrible they may be. We become attached to our suffering because it is part of who we are, and we do not know who we would be without it. This attachment makes us resistant to change.

Transformation toward freedom requires a belief that it is possible for us to become something other than who we are right now. This belief is more easily sustained when we are able to support each other, which connects back to the other elements. As individuals, loss and grief are feelings that we often go to great lengths to avoid, but the truth is they are part of our experience whether we make space for them or not.

Collectively, many people who are working toward systems change or transformation tend to ignore the hardships we would face even if our social justice movements succeed, leaving us ill-equipped for our own success. When we talk of social causes such as housing rights, reproductive justice, an end to the carceral state, or eliminating domestic violence, we often fail to talk about what type of people we would have to be to inhabit and maintain this alternate world. This allows us to avoid recognizing how much damage we have caused ourselves and each other and the healing and repair we need. And maybe it reflects a doubt that this world could ever exist.

A repair that is grounded in creating space for grief, an embracing of what we have lost of ourselves and others, helps us bear the transformation we seek. In a confounding paradox, repair is essential to accessing interdependence and interconnected freedom, which also can support repair.

Transformation, like pragmatic faith, asks us to time travel. It asks us to truly sit with the pasts we carry and the futures we want while helping each other decide who we are today. This changes us. Delving into the elements, paying attention to freedom, and working through this project has fundamentally changed those of us who have worked on Freedom's Revival.

As we change, what we notice about the world and how we interact with the world has also changed. Now that we have seen it, we cannot unsee it, and because we have been on a relational journey, we move each other toward transformation.



Transformation in Practice

People's Kitchen Collective's EARTH SEED Project

Oakland-based grassroots organization People's Kitchen Collective (PKC) created EARTH SEED ⁹⁷ to explore the future of survival. Rooted in Octavia Butler's Parables series and the legacy of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, EARTH SEED enacted radical hospitality as a survival practice.

Bringing together mutual aid, reimagined go-bags and field guides, political education, and community building, this political project provided groups of activists, artists, educators, farmers, youth, and elders space to dream about what Black and brown people's survival and care could look like in apocalyptic times.

From March to June of 2023, EARTH SEED went on a pilgrimage through California from Los Angeles to the Mendocino Woodlands. In partnership with communities, they visited people and places building models for survival and collective futures. The project was created by staff and a council of PKC volunteers. Their experience of designing, planning, preparing, and engaging was all held by a practice that encouraged and supported their present and future selves.

Artist and council member Kamakshi Duvvuru reflected on the way having space to show up with vulnerability and without artifice allowed for her transformation.

On the Pasadena walk, I'm thinking about the journey of coming in and feeling this really large weight or dissonance of how to step into a space that would require so much of ourselves to be here

⁹⁷ Mia Birdsong is a long-time People's Kitchen Collective volunteer and a member of the EARTH SEED Radical Hospitality Council.

and present in the possible world [we were building], but still holding and bringing in so much from each of our personal lives out in the world. That first day really did feel dissonant. But as a couple of days passed I think there were two things that happened. One was having the space and permission to be there exactly as I was. To not be this perfectly embodied version of a healed future, but to be there in whatever capacity I had. To be there as a changing being. I felt that space and permission from everybody in the group. That really quite quickly melted that pressure and dissonance I felt. I think the second part of it for me was once I had let go of that pressure and weight [there] was [a] melting into what we were holding or what we were creating for each other. Melting into the safety and the softness of each other. That letting go and then falling into the softness. There were so many ways and so many moments we were constantly holding softness for each other. Definitely in a way that takes effort, but also in a way that was very natural. “Softness” kept coming up as a word on that trip. So many of us discussed what was possible in our space of softness that was not possible outside of it.



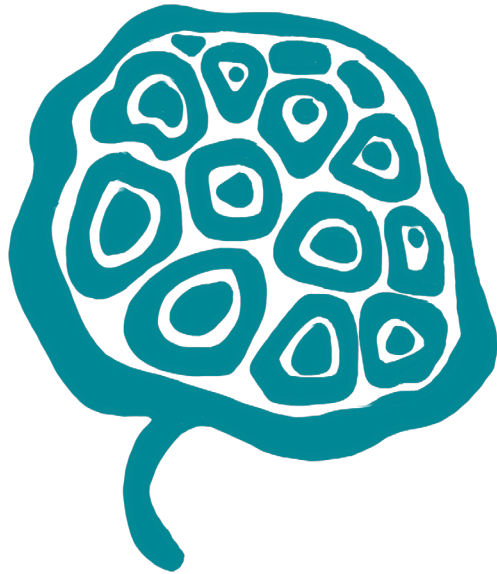
Disaster Response

Many recent disasters have led to collective efforts to repair damage and build something new. As destructive as disasters are, they can often galvanize a community effort to address ongoing social problems that become more visible and acute in

the face of a terrible event. At the beginning of COVID, Arundhati Roy wrote an essay entitled, “The Pandemic Is a Portal,” where she notes, “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew.”

The rupture of catastrophic events can shake us into paying attention, into embodiment. They can unlock human capacity for mutuality. We can see this in the community aid and organizing in the wake of Hurricanes Sandy and Maria.

In *Hope in the Dark*, Rebecca Solnit’s recounting of the impacts of community response to the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and Hurricane Katrina provides additional examples of how humans come together. These events, and the opening they provide, stem from an inability to ignore how broken things are. But these moments of transformation are not inevitable and very often the uncomfortable uncertainty they impose leads people to cling to the systems that preceded the disaster.



6. Dreaming Otherwise/ Alternative Freedoms

*Utopia is not prescriptive, it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema. It is productive to think about utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there that could and indeed should be. Utopia is a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough.*⁹⁸

—José Esteban Muñoz

⁹⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 97.

Most of us think that the space we live in is the most important space there is, and that the condition we find ourselves in is the condition that must be changed or else. That is only partially the case. If you analyze the situation properly, you will know that there might be a few things you can do in your personal, individual interest so that you can experience and enjoy change. But most of the things that you do, if you do them right, are for people who live long after you are forgotten. ⁹⁹

—Bernice Johnson Reagon

How do we get free? While the cultural shift Freedom’s Revival is meant to spark will likely take generations, it is helpful to think about freedom as something we cultivate together. Although we may stumble into it, we can also put into practice the conditions that make freedom possible.

This practice is both personal and interdependent—we can do our own work, we can support each other on this path, and some pieces require the ecosystem of the collective. There are examples of interconnected freedom all over, we just have to train ourselves to notice them. Once we do, we can begin to understand what allows freedom to flourish by paying attention to where the four elements show up. We can cultivate spaces of interconnectedness and reject the false freedom we are offered.

We may have to slow down to glimpse this freedom, we may need to sit with tension and hold the paradox of feeling toward something that calls to us, but

⁹⁹ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century.”

cannot be seen. Of wanting to lean in, but fearing the not knowing.

We will need to lean on each other, give grace in the messiness, bear witness to the grief, and call on our ancestors. But the glimpses we catch will be glorious and they will bring us joy. The vision is blurry because the present is pervasive and hard to think outside, but if we heed Muñoz's writing on utopia, on the horizon we can grasp our freedom, not to hold it but to set it loose. So that it might seed another world. This is our individual journey, this is our collective practice, this is our Freedom.



Interconnected Freedom Comparison

Individual Freedom

Don't tread on me

Individualistic

Separates us

Based on scarcity

Paranoid

World is broken

Leads to hoarding

Rights over responsibility

Requires protection/defense

A state one achieves

Focused on wants

Observing (consuming)

Interconnected Freedom ¹⁰⁰

Free people free people

Interconnected

Fosters belonging/

Returns us to our people ¹⁰¹

*Based on abundance
and enoughness*

Faith-based

World building

Leads to caring for others

*Responsibility as an
act of freedom*

Requires care

A practice one experiences

Tends to needs

Witnessing (being seen)

100 Rinku: There's an old song by John Trudell where he talks about freedom as the ability to take responsibility, and one way that Native people suffer is by having their agency for responsibility stripped from them.

101 Bridgit: This is a profound idea that will inspire anxiety in a lot of white-identified, progressive/liberal people. Much of this identity experience is shaped by the instinct to flee the worst of whiteness in one's life. So, who are "their people"? In my experience, resistance to ideas like this are driven by the fear of being left behind, the fear of becoming an outsider. This can inspire some white-identified (left of center) people to resist this idea and cleave to white-centered space and culture. How to articulate the realness of this? The need to define what it means to have "people" and how to activate imagination for those who do not have [a] clear sense of where they belong in this path to tomorrow?



7. Deliverance: A Postscript from Mia Birdsong

As we are finishing the writing of this field guide, the world has just come through the hottest summer on record. Wildfires engulfed parts of Canada, impacting air quality in many parts of the US. Maui has endured the deadliest wildfire in its recorded history. Climate catastrophe is already here and increasing in impact. Far-right forces are passing regressive, life-threatening laws all over the United States. The Supreme Court is making rulings that negatively impact civil and reproductive rights, and environmental protections. Income and wealth inequality continue to rise.

As always, activists and organizers are working incredibly hard to keep us safe, protect our well-being, and stave off the worst outcomes. But it's hard to not be cynical. It's clear that we are facing unprecedented bad times.

The question is not if things will get worse, but how bad will it be and for how long? And how do we respond? That “how” is not just about what kinds of solutions will develop and what kinds of policies and practices we put in place. It’s about who we will be in our responses.

Will we be led by our fear, scarcity, and anxiety? Or will we move from the deep understanding that the only way we survive is with each other? How do we get ready to take the leap together with a belief that a better world is possible? What capacities must we develop to practice that future?

Freedom’s Revival is an inquiry into clarifying a value we all hold in name, but misunderstand or disagree on in definition. It’s about identifying the conditions necessary for us to build a world in which our individual well-being is supported by the collective. This clarification is necessary so we know where we’re going. But it’s also about who we need to be if we are going to get there.

Rediscovering interconnected freedom is not going to prevent the collapse. It is too late for that; it’s already happening. But it can affect our experience of the collapse. And it would allow the world we build on the other side to be something beautiful, life-affirming, and liberatory. Without the shift, we run the risk of rebuilding some version of what we have now.

This work is not just born of an ideological preference, it is an effort to contribute to our survival. Until we understand, believe, and behave as if our ability to survive is a collective process, we are doomed. We will be left with a handful of billionaires and preppers in bunkers and compounds standing in depraved triumph over a burning world.

It would be a mistake to interpret this as a pessimistic perspective. This is a deeply hopeful offering. It requires stepping away from the hope born of denial about how bad things are and how bad things will get. Freedom's Revival is not a product of the hope that truncates our grief or interrupts our heartbreak. It's not of the hope that rushes to rebuild on unhealed terrain. It's not of the hope that hurries past the discomfort of not knowing what to do.

Freedom's Revival is born of the hope that only comes from facing the devastating truth. It's the hope that has us throwing our arms around each other as we experience the anguish of what we must confront. It's the hope that chooses to jump into the river and swim like hell instead of trying to fix the broken boat that is heading over a waterfall. It's the hope that allows us to see the possibility of our heart's desire flowing up through the rupture.

It's time to ditch the familiarity of the unfree, crumbling world. It's time to stop mistaking false certainty for safety. We have to find the courage to stand in the long arc and do our part in the generational project of building the world worthy of our descendants. We have to put energy and attention toward a world in which we practice getting free, or they will never be free.

Freedom—in its most connected and embodied form—is our inheritance. It is a gift from our ancestors that we know deep in our bones—a gift for us to claim, practice, and live into. It is the gift we must pass on to our descendants. This is our sacred birthright and our joyful duty.



**THE FREEDOM
THAT CIRCULATES
IN THE U.S. IS AN
INDIVIDUALISTIC
FREEDOM THAT
SEES RELIANCE
ON OTHERS
AS A THREAT—
ANTITHETICAL
TO ITS OWN
EXISTENCE.**

8. Appendix: Invocations

Below are some practices to support your engagement with freedom, reflections on how people have and continue to experience freedom, and examples of events that are expressions of freedom. The stories and excerpts, taken from desktop research and interviews, informed our thinking and offer more texture to the elements of freedom.

We also came across quotes during our research that we did not have space to include, so we offer some of them here. In addition to the people cited in this section, we know that there are many unnamed freedom practitioners who have rejected or been excluded from individualistic freedom and sought refuge in interconnected freedom. These people(s) and their lives offer a myriad of examples of the freedom we seek to revive. This is an incomplete list; you may have your own to add.

- People who failed to meet the eighteenth-century notion of rational (independent) man or its contemporary articulations (e.g., Black, Indigenous, queer, disabled people, poor, children, women, non-Christians, suspected or undocumented immigrants, people experiencing homelessness, people who are or have been incarcerated).
- People and communities who refuse to be enclosed by narrow freedom (e.g., non-conventional families, tribes that are not federally recognized, communists, artists, etc.).
- Nonpeople (animals, plants, our planet).

a. Practices of Freedom

Interconnected freedom is a practice, not a state of being. As such, we've generated both a series of questions as well as guidance for activities to support you and the people in your community in exploring and expanding your individual and collective practice of the four elements of freedom.

Freedom Questions and Considerations

Consider an individual and shared process of journaling, meditating, or talking with others about any of the following questions to explore your individual and collective connection to the four elements of freedom.

Mutuality

- How can I/we create the conditions to show up for myself and others/each other in the ways that I/we want?
- What would feel possible if I/we knew that others would show up for me/us? ¹⁰²

102 Bridgit: This is an important distinction between the concept of relation due to dependence or need, and relation due to the joy and meaning that comes from connection. That's what alights my imagination in this body of work.

Kyp Malone: I am thinking about the necessity of physical space where people can come together. We make do with what we have, but I feel like there is not enough in terms of physical places where people can come together face-to-face. Technologies can confuse and muddy the water of community and add to alienation. We need actual physical places, we need land—not in the model of buying up all the farmland, but I think we need to be thinking about land, it is part of the conversation regarding the collective and freedom. I am thinking of the Seminole Wars and the vision of sovereign collective land where you can grow your own food, live free in cooperation.

- When have I/we experienced accountability to others/each other as a form of freedom? What precipitated that experience?

Pragmatic Faith

- If I/we believe I/we can live into the future I/we want, what would change about how I/we live today?
- What are the unspeakable hopes I/we have for the future?
- What does the future I/we want look and feel like? What is the landscape? How do tasks get done? What happens when there's conflict? What does celebration look like? What's the rhythm of community? How do I/we spend my/our time?
- What would it take to get there? What if I/we believed that future is possible?

The Experiential

- What does it feel like when I/we get free?
- What do I/we notice in my/our bodies? What sensations do I/we feel?
- How is my/our breath?
- Who am I/are we with?
- What do I/we notice about the world around me/us?

- What feels possible when I/we pay attention to the present, living world and are not focused on the past or future? ¹⁰³

Transformation

- What unhealed trauma or hurt am I/are we holding? What might healing from that trauma make possible for me/us?
- What harm do I/we need to atone for? What might atonement make possible for me/us?

103 Malkia: One thing I think of is health and mortality as indicators of freedom, degrees of suffering and joy, the bending of the body toward production and reproduction rather than actualization, the felt experience of subjugation as an inversion of the felt experience of freedom.

Heather: There's something that comes up for me about flying ... leaping because you know you will be caught. The freedom of the net.

Kyp: Everything I am reading on embodied experience is making me think about dancing to the music of Stevie Wonder in a room full of people that you may know, or that you may be seeing on the dance floor for the first time. The dance floor is wildly important and we should meet on the dance floor more. I feel the most free playing music in an improvisatory manner, playing with a community of people that you have been working with, getting to know, spending time with, that is wildly freeing. Singing together en masse feels freeing. Cooking for people that I love and eating with them. Drawing and painting.

Ingrid: I feel most free when I feel most loved.

Bridgit: Powerful question. I wonder if this section needs to go deeper into what happens in the body when we dance? In some of our working groups through which we've developed our thinking about how storytelling/art inspire people on their journey to pluralist identity, we convened a group of artists who all insisted that if we wanted to cultivate the abundance mindset, we had to fund communal dance as the embodiment of "freedom's rehearsal."

- What grief do I/we need to give space to?
How might I/we give myself/ourselves room to grieve?
- What is my/our relationship to uncertainty?
How might I/we deepen my/our ability to sit in discomfort?
- What do we need to accept about our history and present to become capable of repair?
- Who is/are the person/people I/we want to be in the future?
- What do I/we know from past experience might allow that person/those people to emerge?
- Who can help hold me/us in this exploration?

Freedom Practices

Each of these practices can be done alone or with a group.

Mutuality: Tending to a Circle of Care

There is care all around us. We need it, we give it, and we live it as a freedom practice. We want to celebrate and strengthen that fabric of care by noticing it, tending to it, and making it more explicit. Gratitude is one way to nurture that fabric.

For this activity, set a timer for as few as 10 minutes or as many as 30. Use that time to make a list of things people have done to care for you. Think as far back as you want and include anyone whose actions made a difference—loved ones, acquaintances, coworkers, teachers, strangers. A teacher whose encouragement made you feel smart. A neighbor who always has a kind word. The bus driver from when you were in third grade who remembered your birthday. Your dad’s doctor who

supported you when your dad was dying. The former coworker who gently gave you some hard feedback.

When your time is up, choose five things from the list. No matter who they are—living or dead, someone you know well or only know in passing—write them a note of thanks. Express your gratitude for the particular way that they cared for you. Describe what they did and get specific about how their act of care impacted you.

If they are someone you can send the note to, consider dropping it in the mail (you can also put it in an email). If not, keep the letters in a box, burn them, bury them, or do whatever feels like honoring the gratitude you are expressing.

You can make this a regular practice—weekly, monthly, or annually. Make it part of an established ritual or start a new tradition. You can do it on your own, with your family, or with a community you're part of.

Pragmatic Faith: A Day 100 Years in the Future

Set a timer for 15–30 minutes, and spend some time imagining a day—a 24-hour cycle—100 years in the future. This is the future of your wildest, most creative, most expansive, most hopeful dreams.

You can write it down, you can draw it, you can record a voice memo describing it. Whether it's a “typical” day or a special holiday, give this future day as much detail as you can muster. Use your senses to describe what it smells like, tastes like, sounds like, etc. Capture what it feels like to live in this future.

When you're done, reflect on what you've described and list 5–10 words that capture your vision. Use those words to create a playlist with songs that embody the feelings you want this future world to have, or songs that provide the soundtrack for a day in this life.

The Experiential: What Makes You *Feel* Free?

Collective freedom is a felt experience—something that lives in our bodies. Somewhere deep within the fiber of your being, you know something of what freedom feels like even if you don't always have access to that feeling in your day-to-day life.

Maybe you've had this embodied feeling of freedom gazing up at a sky full of stars or watching the full moon. Perhaps you were on a crowded dance floor moving with abandon, and feeling the music inside your body. Maybe you were communing with a stand of trees or floating in a body of water. Or laughing loudly with loved ones around the kitchen table.

Wherever and whenever you feel free, take yourself there and get in touch with that feeling in your body and celebrate it.

Find a quiet place, free from distraction. Set a timer for 10–20 minutes. Get comfortable—you may sit or lie down. If it's helpful to play music, go for it. Reconnect your body to this feeling of freedom through a journaling exercise or as a self-guided meditation.

Where were you? Who or what was with you? What were the sights, sounds, and smells around you? How did your body feel? Where in your body did you feel this experience of freedom? Really lean into the sensory experience of this moment and this feeling—What were you wearing? How did you carry yourself? How did you interact with others and the world around you? Allow your memory to transport you to this experience.

Once you have a vivid sense of what freedom feels like for you, you can pause the practice here. If you'd like, you can also deepen the practice by creating or procuring a freedom artifact that symbolizes some aspect of your experience of freedom. Did you feel truly free under the stars? Maybe you place a small white rock on your altar to

represent that experience. Were you wearing bright red lipstick and dancing wildly? Maybe you tie a piece of red string around your wrist.

The intention here is to create a physical and external reminder that puts the feeling of freedom—and your particular experience of it—into your day-to-day space.

Transformation: Through the Fire

As we move toward our collective freedom, we must transform. We must heal ruptures, atone for harm, excavate our internalized oppressions, and embrace the uncertainty of change. We have to let go of old ways of being and doing to become more capable of practicing freedom.

There is deep societal transformation ahead, as well as profound personal transformation. Part of the process of changing is letting go of that which no longer serves us or stands in the way of our interconnected freedom. Releasing makes way for what's next.

For 10–15 minutes, write or speak aloud a belief, story, or behavior that is a barrier to your practice of interconnected freedom that you want to release. Maybe you believe that asking for help means you are not good enough? Maybe you have limiting beliefs or shame about your gender identity? Perhaps you are often brusque with a partner or child because you have some misdirected anger or anxiety to work through?

As you write or speak, really sit with the feelings that come up. Allow yourself the discomfort, sadness, frustration, shame, helplessness, numbness, or whatever that you feel. Remember to breathe.

On a small piece of paper, write down the belief, story, or behavior in a few words. Collect a fire-safe bowl or tray and some matches. Holding the slip of paper of what you

are ready to release between your fingers, strike a match, and set it aflame. Once it's lit, place it in the bowl and watch it burn.

After it burns, take some breaths. Close your eyes and imagine what might be different for you when you no longer hold this belief, story, or behavior.

Think about a concrete step you can take (or are already taking) to move toward this transformation. It might be as clear as signing up for a workshop, it might be asking a friend for advice, it might be simply admitting aloud that you hold this belief or believe this old story.

Whatever it is, identify a person you can share this next step with and tell them about it—they can celebrate with you, help hold you accountable, and provide you with support if and when the going gets rough.





b. Freedom Stories: Interviews and Scenes

Interviews on Freedom

These interview excerpts—with thought leaders, writers, activists, and future builders—were conducted over several months in 2022 and 2023. These conversations, which happened alongside the rest of our research process, informed and shifted our thinking and understanding of freedom. What is shared below is a fraction of the insight and wisdom we heard.

Prentis Hemphill

Embodiment facilitator, political organizer, therapist, Founder and Director of the Embodiment Institute, host of the podcast “Finding Our Way”

On what freedom feels like

I think what my body would say is that I want to be at home with what is, in this web of relationship and being a part of and somewhat separate from each other. Like, I am me and I’m also you and us. And I think freedom in my body is being able to be at home with that as truth and not to feel like I need to erect a bunch of different separations. And part of what is being at home with is also the cycle of life and death.

It’s also the things on the edges that often we can’t include when we think about freedom only as a utopia. I think freedom also requires some really hard decisions. It requires really hard moments. But freedom in me is to be okay with being related and to be okay to be at home in being related.

On connection and freedom in the experiences (like dancing or being in nature) where we feel free

In a social context, freedom is building relational habits, rituals, and structures that are not in the practice of denying the connection of all things and the cause and effect of things. So, to me, that's freedom, though, in a way ... I mean, gosh, I can really feel it in my body. There's something really scary about how related we all are. And it makes sense to me that we might conceptualize freedom differently.

There's an element of both: I'm here, but I'm also connected to the whole. There's a part of my ego that's a little bit dissipated when I'm dancing. In nature, I don't have to construct Prentis Hemphill the way that I have to when I have to go to work, I have to put Prentis together each day.

I mean, obviously I'm myself, but the way the world is structured you have to create the kind of person that can function in it. I think we're not very good at, and I think the world doesn't require us to be, also connected to that space of all, to be ourselves and be connected to the space of all. We're ourselves and then we're also the projection of ourselves, we move in that direction. So, there's me and then there's the things that I have to suppress. And then I have to show you this me. But we're not moving from the direction of I'm me and I'm also the all. And I think that's part of what for me can access spirit and what can access the sense of freedom.

Tatewin Means

Human rights advocate, Executive Director of Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation, former Deputy State's Attorney for Oglala Lakota County

On responsibility and freedom

My father used to say he wants freedom for his people so that everyone has the freedom to be responsible. This idea of freedom to be responsible means that everyone understands our role in maintaining the balance and maintaining the peace. And we accept it and we're happy about it.

I'm going to take my responsibility seriously because the good of the whole depends on me fulfilling my responsibilities. And that's the idea of collectivism that is gone from American society. And right now, because we're so far away from freedom, we're so far away from liberation, like true liberation, we might have to set up systems of accountability to get us to the point of individual responsibility.

I think in this conversation about freedom, you have to have a conversation about hope, hopefulness, because if you lose that hope, there goes your long arc, right? Like you have to believe that even though I'm not going to see that world in my lifetime, and probably not even in my grandchild's life because I'm a grandma, now, that it still gives me hope because I know that is what we're doing now. It's healing, and it's hope, and it's liberation.

Linda Sarsour

*Author, racial justice and civil rights activist,
community organizer*

On collective freedom

I am thinking about being in Palestine, in an occupied territory and seeing kids still experience joy, and still seeing people experience joy and looking free.

Of course, we know what it means to live under a military occupation. But the people there, there's still some sense of freedom for them that they are able to still engage in because it's about people. They're connected to one another in ways that we are not here. In Palestine, when my children were younger, I would be like, "Where are they?" And the people would look at me like, "What are you doing? What do you mean? They're probably down the hill somewhere playing with some other kids." And we know those people down the hill.

But in New York, I would never let my kids go play even around the corner. I didn't feel free to do that. But there in other parts of the world, because of this idea of community and being connected in those deep relationships, there's a sense of freedom that they feel [there] that we don't feel [here], but we think we are more free than them.

On false freedom

Sometimes people need solitude and being, you know, with yourself and reflecting with yourself. I think there are healthy moments for that. But overall, there is a culture in this

country that teaches you that people are burdensome.

When you go around the world, and if you know people in communities where there are racial or ethnic enclaves—even in the States—people know their neighbors. There are so many communities around the country where I'll come to people as an organizer. I've got to tell you to do something. I'm not going to just tell you what the problem is and try to inspire you. You've got to have tangible things to do.

I always remind them of this chant, especially for folks who are not movement people, where we say—you know the chant—there's a part that says, "We must love and protect one another. We have nothing to lose but our chains." And I say to people, how are we going to protect one another and love one another when we don't even know one another? Like, do you know who your next-door neighbor is? Right? Do you work in a corporation where you walk by this guy in a cubicle and you don't even know his name? You don't know her name, you don't know their name?

Like there's people that are in our very close vicinity, right? Whether it's the person down the hall from you, the neighbor downstairs from you in your apartment complex, maybe it's even the store owner where you go every day to buy your cup of coffee and you don't even know the name of the person that you're literally having an interaction with.

The same lady you see [at] the bus stop. Wait, you're going to work every morning and you don't even know that lady's name? And so I say

to people all the time, this country is kind of like, don't worry about everybody else. As if the people that are around you are some sort of robots. Like they're not just other human beings.

I talk to everybody. I'll get on the bus—my mom always laughs at me [about this]—when I get off the bus, I know four new people. Because people are not robots, believe it or not, there are people who appreciate that interaction with you because it also makes them feel like somebody sees them, right? That they're just not a person that just came off work and about to go home and tired.

There's this encouragement in this country of this idea of being by yourself. I'm not going to go out with my friend tonight. Imma stay home, which is fine every once in a while. But for me, I don't thrive like that. Like I don't feel like that's healthy. And this country is all about that. It's all about this idea of your independence.

I don't thrive on independence. I thrive on interdependence. I can't do movement work without my people. I can't do family stuff without my family. I can't. It's this idea that we care more about, like, you got your master's. Now you're looking at your second master's. Maybe you're going on a PhD right now. You wrote one book. You're thinking about what your next book is. You know, like there's always the physical thing that you want to have, the next degree, the next opportunity. And I think in other places around the world that I've experienced, people see success as contentment.

For example, if they're married, they have a good marriage where they have some sort of understanding with their spouse. They love their spouse, they have healthy children. They have a shelter, you know, a roof over their head without judging—and what kind of shelter it is, it's something that keeps their family warm. They're able to feed themselves and feed their family and they have access to other people, their grandmother, grandpa, uncle, aunties, cousins. And for them, they got the basics.

But the most important thing is their health and their contentment and their family and their love. That's what brings them their wholeness. And I feel like people here will have everything—beautiful house, beautiful cars, every degree you could imagine possible. And then you hear all these stories of suicide and stuff and people will be online. Like, what do you mean? He committed suicide? He's got everything!

People will talk about all these celebrities and say, But this person has everything that you want. And I'm always like, no, they actually want what you got.

You know, they actually think that they have everything, but actually the most important thing was their peace of mind, their contentment. And that's probably what they were missing.

Eric Gottesman

Artist and Cofounder of For Freedoms

On finding freedom

I feel free parenting and I don't recognize it when I'm in it. I say I don't recognize it when I'm within it because it feels binding at times. But when I'm able to step out of it or when I'm forced to step out of it, I recognize how much joy and openness it unlocks in my life.

The struggle is an important part of it for me. I recognize that part of the vestige of feeling confident in doing something ... How can I say this? Mastery is a myth. And being able to master a craft artistically or in life, you know, physically or whatever—that is a myth that has been sold to us. And it's a myth upon which an individualist sense of confidence arises, right? I never feel like a master of being a parent.

I mean, there are moments where I shine and there are moments where I suffer and there are moments where I get hit in the face. There are moments that I fuck up, you know. And I think there's something in that messiness that gives me license or gives me a different relationship to confidence or to learning or to improving that does feel freeing.

In my work where I've collaborated with different communities around the world in making artistic projects, there is always pain and struggle and difference that come up through the work. And when it's successful, the overcoming or understanding or what can feel like compromise or giving up actually makes

things far better than I could have ever imagined by myself. And that just feels so good.

I mean it feels liberating to know that I can access things that exist outside of me. Through collaboration, through understanding, through love. It just feels so much better than being on my own. I feel more connected.



Sage Crump

Artist, culture strategist, facilitator

On spaces where freedom is experienced

In the last couple of years, I started going to Negril, Jamaica. It's a little spot. And I'm barely a swimmer, like I think I can save myself from drowning. I'm able to be in the ocean and walk almost half a mile and I'm still standing.

So, I can see the shore and it looks far enough away that it looks "in the distance." I'm in the ocean, but I'm also standing on the ground. And when I float there, it does something to me. The effortlessness of being held in that moment. It rearranges me and that's when I feel most free. Which is interesting because even now, just talking about it with you, I realize part of what truncates my sense of my own freedom is when I feel like I'm a burden. And so, the way the water holds me with such effortlessness.

And being a woman of size, there are so many things that feel effortful. The freedom of "nothing about me makes anything harder for me or anyone else," that has, in the last few years, really been a space where I have felt the most free in my life.

On embodiment and freedom

I'm a house head. I'm a house music club kid. And the dance floor of any space with a good house is a space of freedom. I could go to a house party and I will be dancing next to someone I've danced next to for 30 years. And I don't know their name, we just know this is where we come. There's unspoken collective agreement of folks in this space of how we're

going to move. And you've seen how it's all legs flying, people spinning, like all kinds of things that happen.

The last time I was at a house music event in New Orleans, it was hysterical because we were dancing, we're having a great time. It's so beautiful, amazing DJs, and it wasn't until I actually looked at my phone, I looked at the time. I was like, Oh, it's 2:00. Oh, Lord, time to go home. Right? Like, I had no concept. The minute I realized I had been dancing for five hours, suddenly my foot hurt, right? And so, this idea, back to possibility, transcendence and freedom are interconnected in that environment.

I think there's a universal acceptance in that space. Some folks are spinning, waving their arms around, and some folks are like my best friend. She'll just stand in the middle of the room and she just waves her hands the whole time. She'll do that for hours. And nobody cares. There is a sharing. If you have baby powder, I have baby powder. If I have baby powder, you have baby powder. And there's a shared longing. And I don't know if I'm reading more into it, but it feels true.

Like you want to be there, first of all, and then you want an experience that you don't have anywhere else. You want it for yourself, and you want it for everyone else. Like, I'm going to move to the side when you need more room. There's a negotiation of bodies and needs in that space. There is not scarcity.



[In the songs] you're going to find "There's light in the darkness." You're going to find, "You are

my friend.” You’re going to find, “Shine your light.” You’re going to find, “You are magnificent.” You’re going to find, “Spirit has you.” You’re going to find, “It’s gonna be all right.” You are inundated with it. It’s not a low volume type of music. It seeps in you. It hits you. And I think that sets the tone for how we get to be with each other in it.

You know, it almost feels like a collective responsibility. Like to be like, Come on, come in. You’ll find welcome. You will find constant, repetitive welcome and invitation.



Paris Hatcher

Founder and Director of Black Feminist Future

On embodied freedom and the political implications of individual freedom

I think it's like this unbridledness. I just had the sensation of air. I just got a Vespa scooter and that feeling of the wind. Just feeling like I'm in the world. I'm of the world. Yeah, just that sentiment.

But I think the core piece around freedom is really truly the ability to determine your path, your trajectory, to be able to really feel your length and your width, and feel yourself anchored to something bigger too.

So, it's not just about yourself, which is really important, but it's also about how you link and connect to other beings, other things, because it helps you get even freer, right? It helps you feel more, think more, expand more, even hope and desire more.

Like, I am obsessed with Iceland because it's so rogue. It's really the embodiment of freedom. There's just waterfalls and geysers and hot. It's just an overwhelming experience of full throttle-ness.

So, freedom to me? Yes, it's a political project, but it's the state of being. It's a state of morphing. It's a state of collectiveness. It's deeply nature bound, too. I think nature is one of our greatest teachers of freedom.

On false freedom and choice

One of the reasons why we in the [reproductive justice] movement moved away

from the choice framework was because we understood that choice was so individual. It was based on the idea that everyone's making the same type of choices and we're not. We're not all living in the same type of reality where everything is neutral.

So "my choice" really works when you have choices. I mean, that's literally what happens, right? But what if you are a young person who is living in a rural area and you decide you don't want to be pregnant and then you have to travel maybe a state away? Is it choice? If you have to choose, do I pay rent this month or make that my car payment or do I choose to terminate a pregnancy that I may actually really want? But I can't really make that choice. It's actually not a real choice to make. It's [a] false choice.

We really see that the framing of the 1970s is that being pro-choice for so many people, so many women, it was never really an active choice that they felt like they could really opt into.

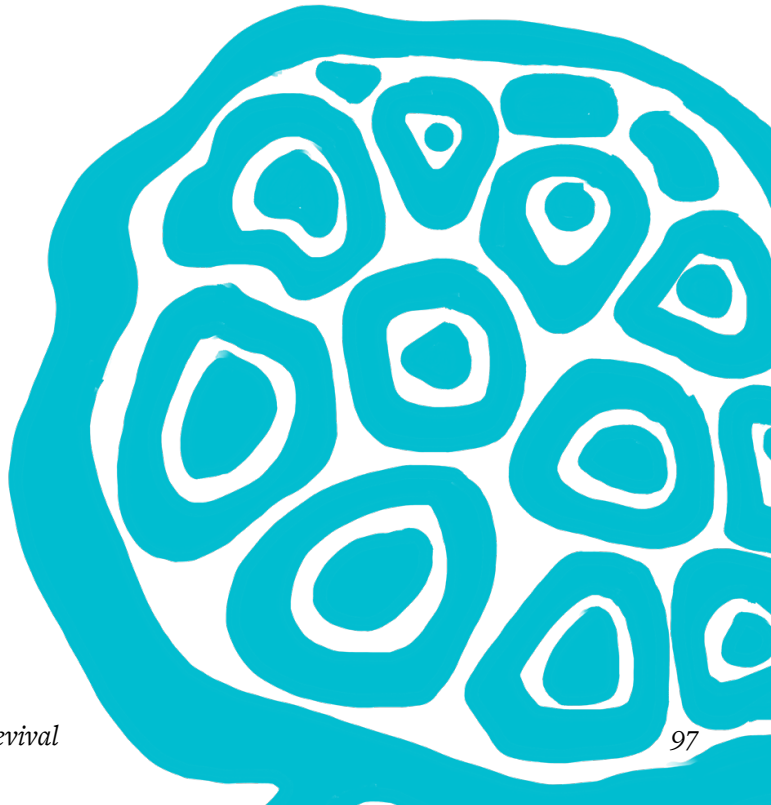
On the ongoing practice of freedom

Freedom is not just a one-time thing. It's like a fire. You have to tend to it and tending fires is work.

You cannot just be like, "Peace, fire." You've got to build it, tend it, feed it, make sure it's getting the right oxygen. People really desire it. But it's easy to get lulled into comfort. And I'm not saying you shouldn't have things that feel good. I love things to feel good. I love to have a good experience, a good time. But there becomes this lulling that's like, quiet the fight, quiet the search for freedom. I've seen it with people as they become more financially stable, especially

if they were really on the margins and they start to attain a little bit more stability, they start to identify more with folks who are actually super wealthy.

You've got to stoke your freedom. You've got to remind yourself that the lulling of like the desire to be comforted, the desire to believe that the building of this inner world that will comfort you because you did all the "right things" and therefore you deserve the prize of safety is like, no, actually being in collective keeps you safe. Continuing to strive for freedom keeps you safe. Being lulled into comfort, lulled to sleep in many ways is not going to help us. It just makes you go to sleep. It doesn't make you safe.



Denise Perry

Co-Executive Director of Black Organizing for Leadership & Dignity

On the unraveling that it takes to find freedom

When I think about change and transformation, I think about that arc that folks go through to get there. And there's this idea of what wants to be different, proposing what wants to be different then getting in this mix of chaos, the unraveling and then falling on the other side of change, like the new piece.

What often happens when people are in this transformation of their own is that when we get to that unraveling, more often than not, we fall back to what we know and what soothes the soma. We fear letting go to be able to be on the other side. If I think about freedom in this context that you're talking about—that I totally get and embrace—I'm like, wow, what will that unraveling mean. And the fact that we need to know that that [freedom] is going to exist so that it doesn't run people back to the other side.

I feel like there's so much bondage in living in this current space-time-place that I really struggle with the idea of "What's freedom?" I know the things that get in the way of my sense of feeling free. But how do we connect with each other first? So that thing that we're talking about out there really resonates with all of us because it's not going to be easy.

Having had the opportunity and experience to travel—being in relationship with people from different countries, being hosted by folks in their homes, being welcomed and engaged in

their day-to-day, and their organizations. Those experiences have taught me more than anything and gave me a sense of what more is possible.

Not to totally romanticize it, but part of me is, it's experiencing different ways of being. I spent a month in Senegal staying in this woman's house, and she was like, "Oh, here, help yourself, here is this, and here is that, and we have this goat out here and we're going to take care of the goat. And y'all can have goat. And on the weekends, here's the list of my family. You can go and stay with them." And I'm sleeping at these people's homes, and they don't know me, and they're making food for me and I'm sitting here with my hands all up in their food with them. Here in the US, we're like, there's a fine hotel down the street that you can go stay at and dinner is at six.

On the conditions for transformation

How do we release ourselves to the place of being okay with a bunch of "it ain't gonna work?" To be okay with failure. And failure might not even be the right word. Like it didn't turn out exactly like you planned, but we're in a different place ... We're so programmed about what our shortcomings are that we totally miss what we have to offer. So, how can I appreciate who I am in order to feel open enough to give people whatever it is I have?

Because some of the holding back is because we don't think what we have to offer has the value or that it could be accepted or whatever. Right? If I think it's shitty, then you're going to think it's shitty. So, there's that internal care and

appreciation for ourselves. And we get there not alone, right?

We get there because I'm willing to be in this with you and take in when you say, "Oh, you know, I really appreciate what you just did there," or whatever, whatever. I think we have to be okay with ourselves and that is in relationship with others.

On experiencing freedom

Just being on just like a great bike ride with friends, just out there on our wheels, able to go far, my perspective of everything is so much different, even with the slight fear of like getting hit by a car or something.

When I talk about it, it feels more scary than when I'm in it. There's something different about how you relate with the people that you're riding with. There's an interdependence in that, like who's in front and how far are we going to go and should we stop and all of that.

That whole journey is full of adventure, even though you know what's at the other end, it feels so much different to be in this journey with someone else on it. There are some trips that I've been on where I'm just like. Wow, this is just such a different world. Having made that arc feels really powerful.

Malkia Devich-Cyril

*Activist, writer, Founder of the Radical Loss Project,
Founder and former Executive Director of MediaJustice*

On implications of freedom

We're going to go against some parts of what we believe in, in order to achieve this dream. That's why the movement or the process by which we fight has to be imbued with such extraordinary values. The process has to be constantly threaded through with this vision of the kind of humans we need to be, because we won't be that.

It's like there's two things at war constantly that the attempt to win freedom requires these sacrifices of conscience, of all kinds of things. You know, because the other side is absolutely vicious. But also it requires a constant reminder of the vision and what we intend. I think that we won't execute some grand change in advance of this new way.

We have to be in a constant process of reminding ourselves of this new way of being and who we want to be and who we intend to be. And we have to build into our systems the ability to remind people who they truly are. We need to build it into our school systems and we need to build it as part of our policy objectives, and as part of each fight, each campaign. That gives us an opportunity to remind ourselves of what kind of freedom we're fighting for. To me, it's a process question as opposed to an outcomes one.



One of the major elements of how we pass on our stories, how we remind each other, our children, of who we mean to be, is through our poems, through our songs, through culture. In the civil rights movement, when we sang our songs, it's one of the ways that we stitch into our DNA this vision. It becomes more than a mandate. It becomes a method, a way of being. We stitch it into our foods, our hair designs.

Every aspect of who we are can become threaded through with our values and our vision. I think that's why cultural strategy and building and demanding cultural power is inherent to any fight. That's how you teach. That's how you transmit from generation to generation a vision for freedom.

On grief and repair

When you're in a system and a society that mechanizes your death as routine, then your grief has to become a weapon, a culture, a part of the cultural strategy toward your freedom. And so, my work around culture and narrative has expanded, to include grief as narrative strategy, grief as cultural strategy, grief as a part of the movement for freedom.

The question inherent in grief work as a political work is, if grief is any response to loss, that means that people can respond to loss with resentment. They can respond to loss with a refusal to let go, they can respond to loss and all of the ways that we've witnessed the American right responding to loss. They can respond to loss the way the American right responded on January 6. They can respond to loss the way the American right responded in Greensboro. All of these acts of terror and violence are, in fact, I

think, forms of grief or a retaliation against grief, in fact.

My work is to inspire and conspire to build a vision of radical loss, where loss is responded to with something more transformative for the human spirit, but also for the material conditions.

How neocolonialism thrives is that people become reactionary. They become alienated. They become apathetic. And in the context of apathy or a belief in their own powerlessness, they are conscripted into neocolonialism. I believe that if we can engage grief with a heightened vision and with more rigor and with a strategic purpose, we can change how we fight for our freedom.

Kabzuag Vaj

*Founder and former Co-Executive Director
of Freedom Inc.*

On being free

I think I've always strived to be free. And I think that freedom has a definition, but there's also a feeling, right? A feeling of what it means to be free. And I think that that is not something you have to teach somebody. It isn't something that people can look up in a dictionary and say, "Oh, I think I'm not free." Right?

But I think that every person yearns to have that feeling of freedom, whether you know what it is, whether you've had the privilege of living it out ... When I first started Freedom Inc., it was basically saying, these direct service programs may give us food, but aren't helping me through anything else, you know?

And so, I just said, I want to be free. I want to create a world I want to live in. I want to create an organization where I want to go. I want to be in a community that loves me and wants me.

Kirk “Jae” James

*Clinical Assistant Professor and Director of the
Doctorate of Social Work Program at the New York
University Silver School of Social Work*

On collective freedom and incarceration

We talk a lot in theory about freedom, but there are certain circumstances that really push it from theory into a reality.

One of the circumstances that really pushed me was when at 18 years old, I was arrested and charged under the Rockefeller drug laws. I was ultimately sent to Rikers Island without bail. I'd never been arrested before. I was charged as a drug kingpin. I would have to spend six months in Rikers Island before being sentenced to seven years to life.

During this period being incarcerated, I would have a lot of time to think about freedom. I would have a lot of time to think about the things that I lost. What actually did feel like free? Was it the transactional things or was it the times with family, the meals, the community, the conversations, the tensions, the working through the tensions, the learning together? And also, during this period, I would meet some of the most amazing human beings I would ever encounter in my life.

People who would never get home or to this day are still incarcerated, but who at the same time would love me like a son, like a brother. And not only loved me, but made sure that I pondered what freedom was not only for myself, but for my people. Like I had to read George Jackson and Angela Davis and Huey [P. Newton] and

really see myself not as an individual, but part of a larger collective of people who have been historically struggling for their freedom.

And so, for me, when you ask what does freedom mean, freedom is the liberation of all people. It's a world in which everyone can self-actualize. It's a world in which, as Bob Marley says, we emancipate ourselves from mental slavery.

Freedom is imagining that we can actually exist in love. We can exist in a world where scarcity isn't the norm. Where we can repair harm. That's what freedom is to me. It's really all the possibilities and understanding that all the possibilities are present in this moment.

To the question: When do you feel free?

In community. When I feel seen and held in community, and when I feel that I'm able to see and hold people in community and we can just be really vulnerable with each other. And when I also recognize that I'm not being free, it pushes me to ask why? Why not? Like, what am I worried about? What am I afraid of? Also really wanting [to be free]. It's silly to say that, but I don't know if everyone really wants that, you know?

Alexis Pauline Gumbs

*Author, poet, facilitator, Cofounder of the
Mobile Homecoming Project*

On embodied freedom

The freedom that I have experienced and that I am experiencing in this lifetime is an experience of profound connection. And that connection can be with other beings, it can be with land, it can be with water.

The first image that came to me was floating in a particular body of water. Rendezvous Bay in Anguilla, which is the place where my grandparents taught me to swim. That's a feeling of freedom, feeling connected, safe, but also like in a transformative space, which water is.

I think freedom is the experience of feeling so connected to source, to the possibility of infinity, that everything feels possible and that I have access to everything. I was thinking about the most recent time I was in that water. I was thinking about all the conversations that have happened in my family in this particular piece of the world that we've been in relationship with, and that water as an archive for all of it that I could access. If not the exact words, the feeling of a conversation that my grandparents, who are ancestors now, my dad, who's an ancestor now, that they had. Whenever they had it.

So, my definition of freedom also includes that form of connection that transcends time. It can be deeply grounded in space; it can also be something that transcends space. I think it has something to do with profound presence. It's at once a particular example of a definition of freedom. Harriet Tubman saying, actually,

freedom is collective. All of us have to get out of slavery and slavery itself has to end.

Even in her free time, at least geographically beyond the scope and post-Civil War, she was like, and we have to have collective housing and care. This was how she was defining freedom.

At the same time, it's also evidence of her freedom. That she could physically be in spaces where not only was slavery the law of the land—the Fugitive Slave Act making slavery the law of the entire United States—but she in particular was hunted by a warrant for her. So just the very fact that she would place her physical body anywhere in the United States, that she was free enough to do that.

So, there's not a scarcity like, well, I just got to, I mean, everyone would understand that I've got to stay in Canada. Like, what the heck? This is not safe. I believe it was her connection to her purpose, it was her faith in the fact that there was something bigger than her that supported and held her. It was her value that said, "The longevity of my physical form is not the most important thing. I exist in a context of freedom that is beyond the sustaining of my physical form."

It's a similar thing when I think about Fannie Lou Hamer and the mass meetings and these people, they're going to register to vote and they know the consequences of that in their community. And they do it anyway. That's evidence of their freedom. And so in each instance, these are absolutely unfree spaces that they're being free in. If we could believe that, if we could believe in freedom and act on it—that would be the definition of freedom that you propose.

I've written about Harriet Tubman speaking in the present tense. "My people are free," in the present tense. And my definition of freedom is also in the present tense. At the same time that we hold the reality that all of these systems are ongoing, that are separating [us], especially separating Black people, from each other and from kinship and from nature and all of these things.

At the same time our freedom is present because our freedom is presence, right? And how do we practice presence? Well, we practice it in connection. You believe that you can be free in an unfree space. And understanding that whatever the unfreedom of that space is, is not actually the limit of your freedom. So, it's as if we are claiming an expansive definition of freedom as we inhabit an expansive definition of freedom and we're redefining freedom like. All of that is happening at the same time.

Angela Garbes

Author and speaker

On embodied freedom

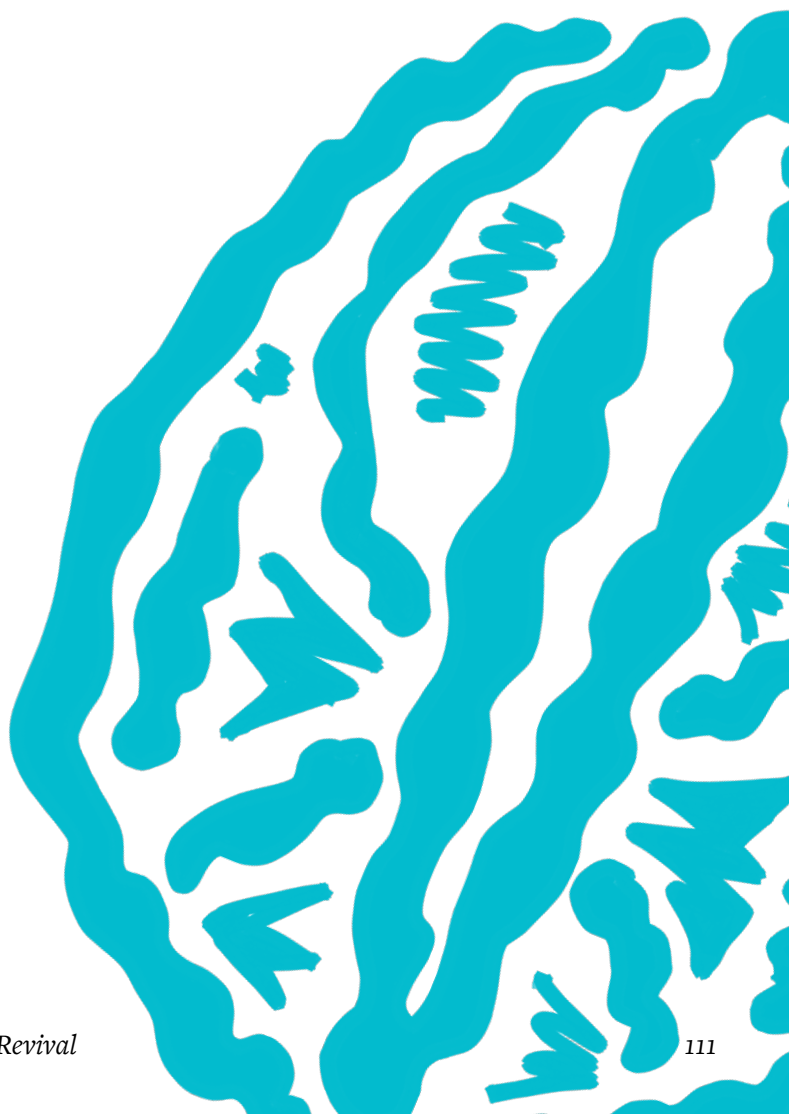
I feel most free ... It's dancing for me. It's pure. It's like a physically ecstatic sort of state of being. A lot of times, I can't turn off my brain.

A lot of times, I'm holding a lot of duality and conflict and wanting to just not think about things. So, there's something [about] when I'm moving, when I'm really feeling free and ecstatic in my body with this knowledge that colonialism wants me to not even enjoy my body, to think I'd be better off without this body. And it's a thing where my brain is kind of present—it's helping me do my movements—but I'm not consciously thinking. I'm in dance.

I feel like I'm saying something that doesn't have words, but I am showing you who I am, I am expressing, I am working out a lot of feelings. It's just me physically sweating, touching some sort of interior, inexpressible part of me, that's when I feel most free.

But I also really love that shared physical release and that way of connecting with people that is wordless. I can get there on my own, but I love it with other people. One of my favorite things in the world is to look at someone dancing and be like, "Oh, only you could do that. Only you could make that movement." And it's the same thing in a way that I admire in writers where I'm like, "Oh damn. Who else could ever turn that phrase?" So there's something there that's like what I see in other people.

I'm a social person, right? But I don't always want to talk, so there's also just the physicality of it. There's the heat, the humidity, the sweat. There's the smell, that incidental contact. That's what I love.



Ejeris Dixon

*Organizer, political strategist, writer,
and Founder of Vision Change Win*

On transformation

What I worry about is that the capitalist, white supremacist version of freedom is how people—in a real micro-lens—take care of themselves sometimes in the midst of oppression.

There's a trajectory, that sometimes I feel even pulls me, to think, "How long will you let the people let you down until you just take care of your own?" It feels in my head like some type of Black capitalist siren call happening, you know? It's like there's a dude with glasses and a suit.

A lot of us make these really complex choices in the midst of capitalism. Like, I'm a Marxist, but I'm also like, "Collective housing? Let me get my own." You know? We tether, and we make, and we do our best and try to find our way.

What's hard in this society as it's constructed is that sometimes people are finding ways to build a sense of safety through leaving collective and by focusing on individuality and individualism in some ways. I won't want to say that we're all making these big individualistic choices, but sometimes it's just like what many of us are thinking is that it's protectivist.

A lot of us also have been mentored by generations of movement folks that have given a lot, and made tremendous sacrifices. So, we have these stories of folks who felt betrayed or left behind by political choices—incredibly important political choices—radical

revolutionary Black people, people of color, queer people.

One of my moments of politicization was in the stories of Black Panther women and Black women in the civil rights movement—I did my senior essay in college on this. There was this dual fascination for me around both the gender oppression and violence that people were navigating that’s internal to the movement. And the way that heartbreak, trauma, and sometimes even psychological breakdowns were evident in people’s narratives. And wondering if that is a point-in-time situation or if that continues? And what does it mean for men as a young activist? How does it bode for me? Is this going to be my path? Is this just the path of, you know, of queer folks, of women, of nonbinary folks, of trans folks? Like, is this inherently the path?

So, I love [the idea of freedom as interconnected] and I think it’s right. And I may just be so stuck on the fact that there’s a part of the unlearning that is hard. And I think what’s particularly hard is that the transition point between terrible freedom and beautiful freedom is mucky and so many of us have lived it.

So many of us have created gorgeous political experiments where we’re unlearning historic cultural values and trying to practice new values. All while knowing that the harm will happen in those containers. But that hurts different, and the more of those hurts you hold, the more of the like, facilitating the process inside of the revolutionary organization or the like, Oh, while we were envisioning this new thing, somebody came and stole all of our wallets. Or whatever those stories are.

I get very curious around, how do people fortify in that transition? Because historically, in my understanding and in my experience too, the fortification is just like the language of being disciplined and sacrificing until people hit their limit or then start to just carve their own way.

It's in the carving their own way that actually feels divergent from [the freedom] you're talking about. Where we're in, but out. Where we're like one foot in the like, oppressive freedom and one foot in the new one. And it's not because that's where anyone wanted to be, but it's where hurt, tired burnout took us.

Like at my best for a short period of time when I would bring people into the Audre Lorde project, I would say, I don't promise we'll get there. I want to make mistakes with you. Because I just felt that need because there's a heartbreak that happens. Because when we invite people into liberatory political projects, they assume that they are stepping into the perfect, an ethereal, [laughing] like none of the apples have bruises here, the water is always clean, nothing ever smells bad here.

I wonder if that's the capitalist supremacist conditioning. I'm a trained organizer, [with] tons of base-building experience. The first way I understood it was like, sell injustice, that's what it is. But if you have a sales perspective on what is happening when you're inviting people into movement, then you're going to hide anything that's hard.

Sometimes there's a language of going away to heal. So how are we practicing the fortifying in the thing [without leaving]. In my experience when there's pressure applied to our movements—additional pressure, because we're already under pressure.

When there's pressure applied to our movement spaces, people kind of move to the edges of their personalities. And we have these splits between the folks deaden really well—deaden and do. Like, "Feelings? What feelings? I fed 300 people today!" So, there's that crew, and then there's the "I need a second. I need to take in what's happening to me and how I am." And all of that is in people in general, but what I'm speaking to is how it impacts groups and group projects.

Because in that splitting, the fortification strategies look different for those different groups. And then there's this piece around how do you fortify people to still be in community with each other, with people who have different trauma responses, right? Who navigate triggers really differently while they're navigating? While they still have like movement and self and life responsibilities and that.

On mutuality

Someone who I really admire in movement was like, "I love you because you're funny and fun and not because of the political work you've done." And I was like, "There is a part of me to be valued outside work?" And that felt freeing. And [I] think it's everything we're talking about [regarding freedom]—being in a beloved community where we have the space and time to see each other, where we have found

containers, where taking care of others does not mean we're not taking care of ourselves.

But there is a mutuality in it and a trust in it. Like you extend not because you're clocking, "When is this person going to take care of me?" But because you know that you are in a community or a container or in chosen family and they're not going to let you fall.



Scenes of Freedom

In our research, we came across many stories that people told of particular events or experiences that evoked interconnected freedom. Each of these descriptions is based on what people experienced and we recognize that many of these events were fraught sites of struggle.

They are not perfect examples of freedom, but they offer a glimpse of what interconnected freedom can evoke and foster for those who experience it.

Mutual Aid during COVID

Mutual Aid during COVID refers to the grassroots efforts of individuals and organizations to provide mutual support and aid during the COVID-19 pandemic. Communities came together to provide assistance with food and supplies, financial support, and health care, as well as to advocate for equitable access to resources. Projects like the Unmonumental Fund and South Bronx Mutual Aid coordinated financial and supply resources to support community members affected by the pandemic.

I'm not used to having many options available to me especially when it comes to funding my education so I'm extremely grateful that the community finds it important for people like myself to be able to have access to opportunities we normally don't have. It feels extremely nice to feel cared about by the community and to know there are people out there who truly care.

I attached a picture of me and my daughter because she is my motivation, especially in education. My wish is to be able to be a good example for her and show her the importance of education.

Thank you so much. Any help that's given to me is really a blessing for my daughter and so I am extremely eternally grateful for that. ¹⁰⁴

—Anonymous

Thank you to the coordinating team of ChurchofMAT! for all your tireless work and efforts to support undocumented people through these times. It's been extremely difficult and draining, the sense of mutual aid and community support have always been alive in our communities.

This money is going to help me pay some past due bills here at home and a bit of sense of relief. My family actually got COVID this past month, and half of the household was without work for that entire time. And wasn't able to apply for any state aid. Thank you for continuing this work. La policia y el estado no me protege, mis amigxs me protejen! ~ The police and state doesn't protect me, my friends do! ¹⁰⁵

—Anonymous

Thank you so much! This will help my mom so much! I think of this quote to all those who donated: "The most generous of people is the one who gives to those whom they have no hope of return" (Hussain ibn Ali). I can't even begin to express how helpful this fund will be to us. ¹⁰⁶

—Anonymous

¹⁰⁴ @churchofmat, "Church of MAT HQ (@churchofmat)," accessed January 29, 2023.

¹⁰⁵ @churchofmat, accessed January 29, 2023.

¹⁰⁶ @churchofmat, accessed January 29, 2023.

All mutual aid comes from a place of love, no matter how frustrated you may be, or angry maybe at the circumstances being what they are. At the end of the day, people don't do this because they're angry. People do mutual aid because of love, right, love for their neighbors, love for their community, love for total strangers. And, and for that I'm immensely grateful that there is so much love in this city. You know, Bronxites, New Yorkers never cease to amaze me that no matter how tough we seem on every level, there's a lot of love in the city.¹⁰⁷

But the work on the ground of like, stopping the evictions, or getting in the middle and filming, and helping, like get the families to safety. That was direct action from regular Bronxites, regular residents that just showed up and decided to do something about it.

So, my experience by and large in the pandemic has been, yeah, I can call government, I can leave these voicemails I can, you know, maybe we'll play phone tag, maybe they'll get back to me. But the most substantial action has always been the direct action of just regular people coming together and saying we're going to do something about this right now.¹⁰⁸

I just feel like systems have that type of mutual support have always existed, right. And people that have affinity with each other, especially in New York City, have like banded together for self-preservation—for survival. Like, that has always been a thing. You know, especially in immigrant communities, especially in queer communities, like,

107 Ariadna Phillips, *Community Care during COVID*.

108 Phillips, *Community Care during COVID*.

but I think the scale of this is so massive, that people, I think, cannot afford to sort of compartmentalize, and just like maybe only stick to their own, like, the need is so great. ¹⁰⁹

I think things that make it very different from the other structures you're mentioning is it's also not meant to be hierarchical. And people are very used to hierarchy. They're always like, "okay, so who's in charge? Who's the director? President? Who was this? You know, did you vote them in, like, how they get there?" And I'm like, no, we all make decisions together, we all in the same place. We talked about this, we, you know, I guess you could say we vote on it collectively. But if you're involved, we're talking about it in community with each other. And making decisions collectively on how to do things. ¹¹⁰

109 Phillips, *Community Care during COVID*.

110 Phillips, *Community Care during COVID*.

Occupy Sandy

Occupy Sandy Mutual Aid was a response to the 2012 Hurricane Sandy disaster in the United States. The Occupy Wall Street movement mobilized to provide disaster relief and support to affected communities in New York City, providing assistance with food, water, medical care, and rebuilding efforts.

*The Red Cross and other relief organizations kind of took a while to get there. They weren't there the next day, but Occupy was, I'm getting choked up ... It's hard to explain how scary that time was without having any light other than a couple of candles, how absolutely frightening those first few days were, and so Occupy being there really meant a lot to us.*¹¹¹

—Matt Miner

*We were like, show up and we'll figure it out. We'll try to figure out how to make you useful. This was a really technical operation, and I think that's what I thought was really beautiful because like a year ago, we were these dirty, disorganized occupiers.*¹¹²

—Andy Smith

¹¹¹ Samantha Maldonado, "Ten Years Ago, Occupy Sandy Didn't Just Help New Yorkers, It Redefined Disaster Response," *The City*, October 28, 2022.

¹¹² Maldonado, "Ten Years Ago," October 28, 2022.

*The type of mutual aid that folks were compelled to organize during the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy in terms of material relief and boots-on-the-ground response for people is exactly the same thing that we just did for two years with the pandemic, the connective tissue is still really strong and intact and has only grown as more, different waves of things have happened and more people have gotten involved or plugged into groups.*¹¹³

—Sandy Nurse

*I didn't know anything. It was so brand new to me ... It was just a completely different way for me to understand how to be working in community with people because there wasn't a top-down structure. My time really has helped me really understand the importance of maintaining connections with folks, and so that's what I carry into my day-to-day life here in emergency management.*¹¹⁴

—Jill Cornell

113 Maldonado, "Ten Years Ago," October 28, 2022.

114 Maldonado, "Ten Years Ago," October 28, 2022.

Standing Rock

Standing Rock was a protest movement that began in 2016, in opposition to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline through Native American tribal lands in North Dakota. The movement brought together Indigenous people across different tribes and allies to protest and protect the land and waterways, and to call attention to the ongoing struggles of Indigenous communities in the face of environmental exploitation.

That common goal and tremendous communal support motivated many campgoers and Water Protectors to push beyond their limits and expand their skill sets by stepping out of their comfort zones and onto a well-lit path of self-actualization. Thousands were growing, healing, and becoming, constantly. Relatives who battled depression beamed with energy in camp, and youth who were otherwise withdrawn suddenly operated with an obvious sense of purpose.

There was truly a job and a place for everyone. You simply had to show up and then give it your best. Children, youth, and adults learned phrases and songs in the Lakota and Dakota languages. Some participated in their first ceremonies, while others learned to ride horses, bareback, with fearlessness.

Many women, as first-time seamstresses, learned how to sew ribbon skirts. Kitchens overflowed with expert cooks, and novice cooks who shadowed them and soon became skilled in the kitchen too.

Carpenters came and created new carpenters, and structures began emerging all throughout camp. Organizers mobilized new organizers, many of whom refined their oratory and communication skills along the way. Both seasoned artists and courageous new artists contributed their artwork in “Action Art” stations throughout camp.

Nonviolent direct-action trainings, offered regularly, transmuted the energy, anger, and anxiousness of the disenfranchised into focus and commitment. Elders came with knowledge and history, and thousands showed up to listen and learn.

All the while, truckloads of donations poured into camp, creating mountains of wood, food, medicines, clothing, camp gear, and miscellaneous personal items. ¹¹⁵

Like so many others, I left deeply inspired. I can also say with confidence that my loved ones, former students, and new allies made were equally impacted, as we were each markedly infused with a taste of what precolonial, healthy community actualization must have looked and felt like before generations of historical trauma and suppression.

Through our collective efforts, as protectors, organizers, builders, and storytellers, it was proven possible that tribal nations can, in fact, mobilize thousands of people in a short amount of time. Indigenous people can defend the water and defend the land, and collectively defend anything, so long as all are unified by a common goal, so long as the conditions are right. Community health can be realized, again, and people can heal and become motivated, again, so long as there is a trust in and reliance on what worked most within precolonial models of community building. We saw it all in Standing Rock. ¹¹⁶

115 Sarah Sunshine Manning and Nick Estes, "Standing Rock: The Actualization of a Community and a Movement."

116 Manning and Estes, "Standing Rock: The Actualization of a Community and a Movement."

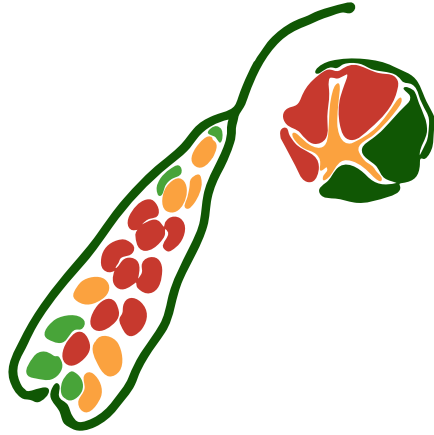
NODAPL offered a brief vision of what a future premised on Indigenous justice would look like. For all its faults, there is something to be learned from the treaty camps of the Missouri and Cannonball Rivers. Free food, free education, free health care, free legal aid, a strong sense of community, safety, and security were guaranteed to all. In the absence of empire, people came together to help each other, to care for each other. Capitalism is not merely an economic system, but also a social system. And it was here abundantly evident that Indigenous social systems offered a radically different way of relating to other people and the world. ¹¹⁷



117 Manning and Estes, “Standing Rock: The Actualization of a Community and a Movement.”

Rainbow Gatherings

The Radical Faeries is a network of countercultural communities that emerged in the 1970s, promoting queer spirituality and celebrating the diversity of gender and sexual identity. The group values personal freedom, community, and environmental stewardship, and has contributed to a legacy of queer activism and cultural expression.



There was no rigid, preplanned structure built into the gathering. The content was primarily allowed to emerge from the participants. For three exciting, inspiring, and growing-edge days, we shared our gifts and talents with each other. ¹¹⁸

—Don Kilhefner

For three days we spent time together and talked with each other as gay men rarely had done before. There were no rules of correct behavior. Two men might be making love at one end of the pool area while at the other end Murray Edelman would be facilitating a workshop called “A Different Night at the Baths.” After lunch one day, a group of about 40 men spontaneously carried buckets of water into the desert to make pools of mud with which they covered and anointed each other with love, caring, and sacred chanting. It was as if these mud-men were out of a primordial tribe thousands of years ago. Throughout the weekend, we shared

118 Don Kilhefner, “The Radical Faeries at 40.”

methodologies of healing, massage, gemstones, giggles, fancy lace, history, spirituality, and sacred spaces with each other as if we were all lovers. ¹¹⁹

—Don Kilhefner

Hay and I deliberately wanted the Radical Faeries to be grassroots and decentralized with each gaggle of faeries being independent and determining its own personality and form while at the same time united in a web of gay brotherhood and exploration of gay consciousness and spirit. ¹²⁰

—Don Kilhefner

Third, the Radical Faeries value community building. In its traditional sense, the word “community” implies caring about and assuming responsibility for each other. Radical Faerie gatherings represent the kind of larger and healthier gay community Faeries want to create and live in: being visibly and openly “gay” in the widest sense of that word; valuing the gifts of each person and weaving those gifts into the fabric of community life; feeding each other literally and spiritually; recognizing that a healthy community honors ancestors, requires elders, depends on adults, and invites youth; acknowledging and assuming our responsibilities not only to the gay community but to the larger community of beings; being environmentally conscious and working to protect and heal the planet; performing the necessary rituals and ceremonies that keep a community healthy and sane; valuing charity and generosity over hoarding and self-centeredness; being culturally aware, imaginatively engaged, and

119 Don Kilhefner, “The Radical Faeries at Thirty.”

120 Kilhefner, “The Radical Faeries at Thirty.”

creatively expressive; and, finally, singing, dancing, playing, dressing up, and having fun. The disappearance of the gay community and the diminution of gay identity are inherent in gay assimilation theory and practice, and they are happening everywhere. ¹²¹

—Don Kilhefner

Thirty years later, I still get goose bumps when I think of the closing ceremony conducted at the last Great Faery Circle that was convened the Sunday night before the gathering ended. In desert moonlight, I see David Cohen, naked and clasping his Dionysian thyrsus, leading 200 Radical Faeries up a mysterious desert ravine to a circle outlined with a hundred hurricane candles with a blazing fire at the center. Several participants saw a white long-horned bull standing on a nearby hill, silhouetted by the moon, as if guarding and blessing the ceremony. A minute later he was gone. ¹²²

—Don Kilhefner

During the 1970s, in the aftermath of the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion, the burgeoning, grassroots Gay Liberation movement had created a small clearing in the forest of hetero supremacy. Gay and lesbian people at long last, and for the first time, had a collective window of opportunity to move beyond individual, isolated survival. A courageous handful rose to the challenge, going through that window, changing the gay narrative from oppression to liberation. ¹²³

—Don Kilhefner

121 Kilhefner, “The Radical Faeries at Thirty.”

122 Kilhefner, “The Radical Faeries at Thirty.”

123 Kilhefner, “The Radical Faeries at 40.”

Anyone who has traveled in the American Southwest knows of its spiritual power, which is a result of its vast open spaces, its magnificent hidden canyons and mesas, the clarity of its bright sunlight, the rich flora and fauna supported by the desert floor, the purity of its crystalline air, the stillness of the night, the amazing colors of its spring flowers, and the many hues of its rocks and sands. A noted European writer observed recently that the Radical Faeries could only have come out of the American West. This statement is not about West Coast chauvinism. It's about the vision and imagination of a group of people who came together and ignited a spark of inspiration within themselves and throughout their land. "Magical" or "coming home to who I really am" are words I have heard over the years to describe the experience of gay men after their first Radical Faerie gathering.¹²⁴

—Don Kilhefner

124 Kilhefner, "The Radical Faeries at Thirty."

The Young Lords Hospital Takeover

The Young Lords Hospital Takeover refers to the 1970 occupation of Lincoln Hospital in New York City by members of the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican revolutionary group. The occupation was intended to draw attention to the inadequate healthcare resources in the community, and to demand better treatment and access to services for Puerto Ricans and other marginalized groups.

From my coworkers at the syringe exchange who had spent much of their lives as dealers and users, I saw how harm reduction had helped politicize their experiences, transforming individual misery into a collective practice of solidarity and a basis for social critique. From my coworkers and harm reduction trainings, I learned how to relate to someone having a very rough time in a way that was relaxed, warm, and built a connection; a crucial skill in most political activity. I learned a lot about the street drugs popular in the Bronx, and the many ways drug use is woven through daily life. My coworkers taught me a bit more about how to love well in this difficult and painful world. ¹²⁵

When refusing their imposed disposability and isolation through revolutionary activity, junkies and their friends move toward a communism not based on the dignity of work, but on the unconditional value of our lives. Our revolutionary politics must embrace the many broken and miserable places inside ourselves. It is from these places of pain that our fiercest revolutionary potential emerges. ¹²⁶

125 M. E. O'Brien, "Junkie Communism."

126 O'Brien, "Junkie Communism."

We could either love or critique, but rarely do both together. I was dealing with my own mental health challenges, and found little understanding in my radical circles as I sorted through the contradictions of how to get care. I vacillated between feeling ashamed that I couldn't figure out my shit right away, and posturing that I didn't have any problems to begin with.

Harm reduction seemed to offer a path toward a different sort of practice: an alternative ethical framework that allowed us to stop constantly judging others—and ourselves—according to the rigid criteria of political righteousness. Instead, we could learn to care for each other with dignity, to challenge our capacity for harm by lovingly welcoming the most painful parts of ourselves. ¹²⁷



Nobody but us is going to worry about our people and whether they live or die especially not people who live a million miles away and go home to clean, lily-white communities where they don't know what it is to sit hours in hot, dirty rooms waiting to be treated. j.j. smith and the crew that run Lincoln Hospital neither understand nor care what kind of health services we receive. They have made that clear by their practice, everybody in the South Bronx knows that Lincoln Hospital is a butcher shop. So, we say it is in our power to remove these inefficient, uncaring dogs and replace them with people who understand that their job is to serve the people and be accountable to them, people who really understand that healthcare is a right, not a privilege! ¹²⁸

127 O'Brien, "Junkie Communism."

128 Organización Obrera Revolucionaria Puertorriqueña, "Palante, September 11, 1970."

It was not just the issue of the treatment in the hospital and the services in a dilapidated run down hospital that the city had been promising to tear down for decades but hadn't done but it was also all the work we did in lead poison detection, tuberculosis detection, drug detoxification, acupuncture; using acupuncture for the first time in drug treatment that was developed by the Lords and the Black Panthers at Lincoln Hospital. Health was a major, major concern of ours at the time but we understood to get the system to change, you had to disrupt it. ¹²⁹



129 Organización Obrera Revolucionaria Puertorriqueña, “Palante, September 11, 1970.”

***c. Interconnected Freedom by Element as Described in Texts, Interviews, and Art*¹³⁰**

Mutuality

- A human being experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings as something separated from the rest ... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.
—Albert Einstein ¹³¹
- Security takes many forms. There is the security of knowing one has a statistically smaller chance of getting shot with a bow and arrow. And then there's the security of knowing that there are people in the world who will care deeply if one is.
—David Graeber ¹³²

130 Rinku: I really love the idea of interconnected freedom. I just appreciate anyone reclaiming freedom for us and redefining it. I find the annotated quotes a little disengaging after the first few in each section. The words start to swim a bit. Design might help, but if you have visual art that expresses these ideas, I found myself looking for that.

131 Papova, “Einstein on Widening Our Circles of Compassion.”

132 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn Of Everything*.

- This book takes it as a given that our entire existence, including our freedom and unfreedom, is built upon a “we” instead of an “I,” that we are dependent upon each other, as well as upon nonhuman forces that exceed our understanding or control. This is so whether one advocates for a “nobody’s free until everybody’s free” conception of the term or a “don’t tread on me variety”
—Maggie Nelson ¹³³
- Maybe friendship can be revalued in an expansive but specific way: it could mean friends, chosen family, and other kin, intimately connected in a web of mutual support. This could be a process through which people come to depend on and defend each other. Intersecting currents of disability justice, youth liberation, queer movements, feminism, ecology, anarchism, Indigenous resurgence, and Black liberation have all emphasized the centrality of nurturing strong relationships while destroying toxic ones. Friendship as freedom, in this story, names a dangerous closeness that capitalism works to eradicate through violence, division, management, and incitements to see ourselves as isolated individuals or nuclear family units.
—Friendship is the Root of Freedom ¹³⁴

133 Nelson, *On Freedom*.

134 Montgomery and Bergman, “Friendship is the Root of Freedom.”

- Positive social change results mostly from connecting more deeply to the people around you than rising above them, from coordinated rather than solo action.
—Rebecca Solnit ¹³⁵
- Solidarity always implies a kind of mutuality.
—Angela Davis ¹³⁶
- Making kin is to make people into familiars in order to relate.
—Kim TallBear ¹³⁷
- Collectivism is a throughline across generations, peoples, and mobilizations—undervalued and unrecognized, but key to freedom making.
—Davis et al. ¹³⁸
- Safety is not the absence of threat. It is the presence of connection.
—Gabor Maté ¹³⁹

Pragmatic Faith

- Who were the first persons to get the unusual idea that being free was not only a value to be cherished but the most important thing that someone could possess? The answer in a word, slaves.

Freedom began its career as a social value in



¹³⁵ Solnit, “When the Hero is the Problem.”

¹³⁶ Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, 41.

¹³⁷ TallBear, Kim, “The US-Dakota War and Failed Settler Kinship.”

¹³⁸ Davis, Angela et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*

¹³⁹ Maté, Gabor, “The Power of Connection and the Myth of Normal.”

the desperate yearning of the slave to negate what, for him or her, was a peculiarly inhumane condition.

—Orlando Patterson ¹⁴⁰

- I have always had to invent the power my freedom requires.
—June Jordan ¹⁴¹
- Freedom materializes in the liminal and interstitial space between our imaginings.
—Neil Roberts ¹⁴²
- Escape is an activity, not an achievement, which means what you escaped is always on you. Refuse that which has been refused to you.
—Fred Moten ¹⁴³
- After all, what is more feminist than the everyday practice of willing an impossible future while resisting the deadly chaos of the present.
—Davis et al. ¹⁴⁴
- I would like to be remembered as a person who wanted to be free—so other people would also be free.
—Rosa Parks ¹⁴⁵

140 Patterson, *Freedom Volume I: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*.

141 Jordan, June, *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays*.

142 Roberts, Neil, *Freedom as Marronage*.

143 Moten, Fred, “The Black Outdoors: Fred Moten & Saidiya Hartman at Duke University,” 2017. <https://www.are.na/block/2559472>.

144 Davis, Angela et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*.

145 PBS NewsHour, “Remembering Rosa Parks.”

The Experiential

- As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action.

Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of “it feels right to me.”

—Audre Lorde ¹⁴⁶

- At secret meetings and freedom schools, hidden away in loopholes of retreat and hush arbors, gathered at the river of dwelling in the swamp, the enslaved articulated a vision of freedom that far exceeded that of the liberal imagination.

—Saidiya Hartman ¹⁴⁷



146 Lorde, Audre, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury.”

147 Hartman, Saidiya, *Scenes of Subjection*.

- Knowledge of freedom is (in) the invention of escape, stealing away in the confines, in the form of a break. This is held close in the open song of the ones who are supposed to be silent.
—Stefano Harney and Fred Moten ¹⁴⁸
- Practicing freedom did not necessarily mean seeking a freedom removed from other social relations in society ... The freedom that Black women practiced was murky, messy and contingent.
—Jessica Marie Johnson ¹⁴⁹

Transformation

- What is destroying our world is the persistent notion that we are independent of it, aloof from other species, and immune to what we do to them. Our survival, Naess says, requires shifting into more encompassing ideas of who we are. To experience the world as an extended self and its story as our own extended story involves no surrender or eclipse of our individuality. We have all gone that long journey, and now, richer for it, we come home to our mutual belonging.
—Joanna Macey ¹⁵⁰

148 Harney, Stephen and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*.

149 Johnson, Jessica, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy and Freedom in the Atlantic World*.

150 Macey, Joana, *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory*.

- If Black folks are to move forward in our struggle for liberation, we must confront the legacy of this unreconciled grief, for it has been the breeding ground for profound nihilistic despair. We must collectively return to a radical political vision of social change rooted in a love ethic and seek once again to convert masses of people, Black and nonblack.
—bell hooks ¹⁵¹
- Freedom isn't attained by ignoring or conquering fear: it is attained by moving through it.
—Breeshia Wade ¹⁵²

151 hooks, bell, "Love as the Practice of Freedom."

152 Wade, Breeshia, *Grieving While Black*.



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