readingroom What Happened in New Orleans? Reflections on the National Convergence of Artists, Educators and Organizers

ROOTS READER

communityartsnetwork

By Andrea Assaf In December of 2003, a self-defined and independent collective of artists, activists, organization leaders, What Happened in **New Orleans?** cultural workers and educators who had begun a conversation on the nature and future of social and **Four Pillars of**

political change in the United States put out a call by Internet: AlternateROOTS

At certain moments in history, an idea catches on that transforms how social change is thought about, discussed and practiced. At the National Exchange on Art & Civic Dialogue convened by Animating

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Democracy recently [October 2003] in Flint, Michigan, many of us artists, organizers and educators from diverse backgrounds and places throughout the United States — agreed that we are at one such moment. The energy produced at that gathering was so dynamic that some of us began a conversation about continuing to share our many gifts, skills, talents and resources.

The idea that sparked us was this, as articulated in Flint by Grace Lee

Boggs of the Boggs Center in Detroit: Working within our separate arenas, progressive artists, educators and organizers have hit a wall in our ability to move society towards a vision of a healthier, more equitable world. No longer can we think about social change as a revolution of only the body (organizing), the mind (education) or the spirit (art). It is all three at once in concert, and this calls for nothing less than a revolution in how we think about and practice social change." Junebug Productions and other cultural workers and organizers based in New Orleans offered to host the gathering in late January 2004. As a staff member of Animating Democracy and one of the organizers of the Exchange in Flint — and personally as an artist, educator and activist — I was excited to participate on the Organizing Committee for the event,

which came to be known as the National Convergence of Artists, Educators, and Organizers. —From the original Call to Action circulated December 9, 2003 (drafted by Mat Schwarzman, paraphrasing civil rights activist Grace

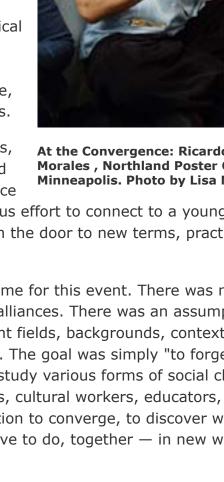
The Idea of Convergence "Convergence" conjures images, for me, of waterways and deltas, of mass movement and culmination, of disparate elements, not previously connected, flowing together in a moment in time. The moment when streams intersect, maintaining the strength and direction of their own currents, yet propelled by the momentum of their collective force toward the ocean. It plays on the sounds of "emergence" and being on the "verge" of something new.

astrology to media technology, business mergers to journalism, science fiction to radical activism. At

The term is used in everything from

national demonstrations and protests, particularly in the anti-globalization movement since Seattle,* "convergence" has been the name given to the center where people meet and sleep, rehearse and build

puppets, strategize and prepare for street actions. It's the place where participants in many different political movements connect, overlap and recharge. It's the place police raid, the place where decisions are made, the place where a movement builds. The National Convergence of Artists, Educators and Organizers borrowed its name from this recent resurgence of mass mobilizations, in a conscious effort to connect to a younger generation of activism, and to open the door to new terms, practices and modes of action. There was no predetermined outcome for this event. There was no formally agreed-upon definition of political alliances. There was an assumption that many different people from different fields, backgrounds, contexts, areas of interest or issue focus would come. The goal was simply "to forge closer ties between those who do, teach and study various forms of social change." We wanted to create a space for artists, cultural workers, educators, activists and organizers from across the nation to converge, to discover what we



might envision and take the initiative to do, together — in new ways, in new directions, or with new alliances. So What Actually Happened? An event that was first envisioned as a modest gathering of 50-70 people continuing a conversation from one convening to the next quickly and unexpectedly swelled to 150 registrants. Registration was closed early for fear of exceeding capacity, as the event was entirely volunteer-run and by donation (there were no registration fees for attendance, and no outside funding except for a handful of contributions). Yet it was agreed that no one

of arriving participants was over 220. We all had the feeling that there were hundreds, possibly thousands, more who would have liked to join us. On January 23, 2004, the Convergence began. That Friday evening was bubbling with possibility. Participants were curious, excited, hopeful, unsure of what might happen and open to anything. We gathered in a comfortable and informal room in the Diboll Conference Center at Tulane University. Opening remarks were offered by Talvin Wilks, of New WORLD Theatre, setting the context and tone for the evening — one of inspiration and a do-ityourself pragmatism through the words of Grace Lee Boggs, in absentia, and of participants present who had sent their ideas, concerns and questions in advance by e-mail. Bill Fletcher Jr., president of TransAfrica Forum, gave a concise and power-packed keynote speech, warning (among other things)

Three respondents of a younger

generation shared their enthusiasm and challenges for the Convergence. Kt Kilborn of Heartsleeve Productions,

Atlanta began with excitement and group encouragement. Kathryn Blume of the Lysistrata Project spoke on "The Four Pillars of Creative Action": Imagination/Love/Inspiration, Structure, The Self, and Faith. And Talvin Wilks of New WORLD Theater, Rene Saenz of the Esperanza Peace & Amherst, Mass., and Sandy Agustin of Justice Center, San Antonio, reminded Intermedia Arts, Minneapolis. Photo by Lisa Mount us of the hard work of working together: "We can't have the illusion that bringing all of our resources together means the work is going to be easier. It can and will be harder calling on us to deal with racism, gender, disability ... differences. It challenges us to really listen and learn ... to constantly be aware of who is in the room, and who is not in the room ... This coming together, and the

social change." Sandy Agustin of Intermedia Arts then led a collective movement phrase, and Michael Marinez (also from Esperanza) and I led a playful series of cultural mapping exercises. These revealed some interesting things: The recruitment goals that the organizing committee set for the Convergence were relatively successful; when asked to self-identify, it seemed close to 30 percent of the participants present were 30 years or younger, over 50 percent were women, and close to 50 percent were people of color. There were indeed participants from all over the continental United States present, as well as Mexico and Canada. And interestingly, when asked to self-identify as an artist, organizer or educator, spatially placing themselves in relation to three designated points in the room, the vast majority placed themselves somewhere in the middle: in an overlapping, imagined space that they were determined to create.

weekend: Where do you get your power?

others to figure out what comes next.

inspired.

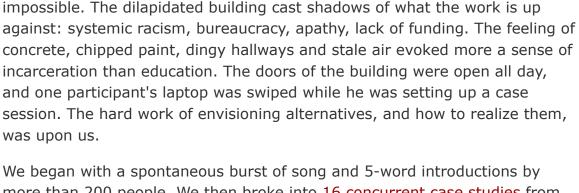
Black Out Arts Collective opened with a performance and led a mini-workshop on

discussion of Hip-Hop-based education. My Mississippi Eyes and The Algebra

Project shared stories of the

the prison industrial complex, followed by a

value and impact of



Douglass High stood in stark contrast to the university setting of the night before, and placed our conversations in a context that made easy idealism

innovative education programs. One young woman, a student at Douglass High, shared her experience in a program: "We learn things in history **Cherice Harrison-Nelson and her mother Hearest** that our history books would Harrison, with Cherice's Mardi Gras Indian never tell us ... It gives us apron. Photo by Lisa Mount insight into our past, not just the same names and dates we always hear. They portray — Martin Luther King was a great man, but he didn't do the Civil Rights Movement by himself like they say. I never heard of SNCC before this." Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women Drama Club, in their closing circle, discussed language

We all reconvened for lunch in the high-school cafeteria, where we were treated to fried catfish, collard greens, beans, sausage and other New

well. The local organizing team had done an amazing job taking care of logistics, people and presenters, and for the most part, everything was

Orleans fare. Except for the missing laptop, everything was going extremely

Space process, which took questions that emerged from the case sessions first, questions posed by participants prior to the gathering second, and anything that arose spontaneously third. It was quite a long list that boiled and converged itself down to six solid strategy groups and a lot of very valuable side-conversations. Most of which, I heard later, were quite productive and meaningful for many. But honestly, I wasn't in any of them, because the organizing committee had its own spontaneous strategy meeting, arising from a crisis of faith for some, a conflict of expectations perhaps, and an urgent and shared impulse to be responsive to how the Convergence was unfolding at that moment. The Organizing Committee: Enacting the Tensions, Living the Questions The organizing committee was a microcosm of the larger Convergence. From early in the process, there were contradictions. How could there not be? We very consciously collected ourselves as an intentionally diverse committee of artists, organizers and educators, from different regions of the country, different racial and cultural backgrounds, different ways of working and different primary areas of interest or concern. This is a good thing. (We

all believe that.) But intentional diversity has its issues, and certainly its

There were different expectations, and perhaps conflicting assumptions. Most participants arrived with a wonderful openness, and willingness to

challenges.

what?

This is a moment, for me, that raised a deep and burning question: What is the gap between what we think we know and what we actually do? What happens in that synapse? Is it just an overlooked moment? Is it swamp of underlying assumptions? Is it an ego that insists I have a better idea? Is it the whole gamut of identity politics and practices, or just plain habit that inserts itself unconsciously into our best-laid plans? In a room full of almost 200 artists, cultural workers and creative people, how did we slip so easily into conference-as-we-know-it mode, full of information, but void of spirit, with meaning so easily lost in a ramble of words, and stiff bodies shuffling out the side door for a smoke or a real conversation? For me, this is precisely the moment I want to understand more deeply, and I want convergence around: HOW do we work together better, to really build a functional unity — not a utopian illusion of national movement, but an actual coalitional mentality and precise practice? How do we bridge that synapse? When Rene Saenz offered his articulate and spontaneous response to Bill Fletcher's keynote on Friday night, he named and acknowledged something so important: We have a long way to go. We still have racism in the progressive left, homophobia and misogyny, classism, ageism, faith and regional prejudices. We have very real things that keep us divided, or at least undermine our goals. And we have to work them out before we can go

order to get anywhere. Agreeing on a common goal is first, strategizing and acting next, and we'll take the hard work as it comes. Otherwise, we ain't **Curtis Muhammad of The Color Line** gonna get nothin' done. Curtis Project, one of the organizers. Photo Muhammad, a veteran organizer, by Lisa Mount concurred and raised the issue of leverage. Without that, we won't be able to build a power base. Without power, he insisted, change can't happen — not in this country. I was reminded of Emerson's directive: "Do the thing, and you will have the power." So there we were, on Saturday afternoon, at a table in the cafeteria. Unfortunately, not all of the organizing committee was present. Some had gone to other strategy sessions before they knew we were meeting, others

• Small group discussions, self-selected and defined (1 hr.) Guitar by Andres Cruz Popcorn reports — points of convergence, challenges for the group, upcoming actions • Talvin closing — Grace Lee Boggs quote • Final performance by M.U.G.A.B.E.E. & spontaneous dance on stage Was this structure actually better? My personal bias is, yes, I think so. At least it was more interactive and energizing, and gave people the space to go where they needed to But I know that's a bias, and I feel certain that it didn't satisfy the need some people felt for further strategy toward

weekend, but we were living the questions. **What Happens Next?** So, what actually happened in New Orleans? Did we revolutionize the way social change is understood, discussed and practiced? Not yet. But more than two hundred people came together to bear witness to discontent; to say something has to shift in our nation and in how we do the work we do; and to demonstrate a real interest in imagining a future, together. The New Orleans

possibilities. People left rejuvenated and excited for an array of followthrough activities they set for themselves. Proposals for continued action, brought forward by participants, included: a Web site for the continued sharing of resources and information; multiple local, statewide and national convergences of artists, educators and organizers; a weekend of art-based voter-registration activities all across the country (September 18-19, 2004!); and numerous individual exchanges and collaborations.

We discovered many points of convergence — many places where our various forms of work flow together, many swamps and many deltas. The convergence was inspired by the insight that meaningful change requires the

body, the mind, and the spirit to work in concert, challenging us as

of our work. Coming together reinforced and validated, not only the importance of collaboration, but a seldom-acknowledged truth that the

and practice as all three.

correspondence.

Barbara Hayley, Tulane University

organizers, educators and artists to realize the necessary interconnectedness

mapping exercise illustrated on the first night: More and more of us identify

Bob Leonard mentioned to me at the conclusion of the convening that it was the first time in his life and years of practice that he'd felt all parts of himself

artist, as an activist, as an educator. And that's huge. What's next? The enactment of creative convergence we have set for ourselves. Follow-through. New models emerging from multiple identities and new partnerships. The performance of leadership (that's another essay). Claiming our power. Personally, I'm excited for the next step, the next turn, the next snake of the river, in the evolution of this particular revolution. Andrea Assaf is a performer, writer, educator and activist interested in cross-cultural

* I want to be clear that what is commonly referred to, in shorthand, as "anti-globalization" is actually understood within this movement to be anti-corporate domination, or anti-capitalism as the dominant force in the new global economy, standing against exploitation of human consumerism. (This is does not mean, as some are quick to accuse, that people in this States (as well as a resurgence of state repression and police brutality). -A.A.**The National Organizing Committee** Sandy Agustin, Intermedia Arts

Performance Network provided administrative support to the Convergence and are providing follow up services as well, including Web site, evaluation and archiving of the notes and

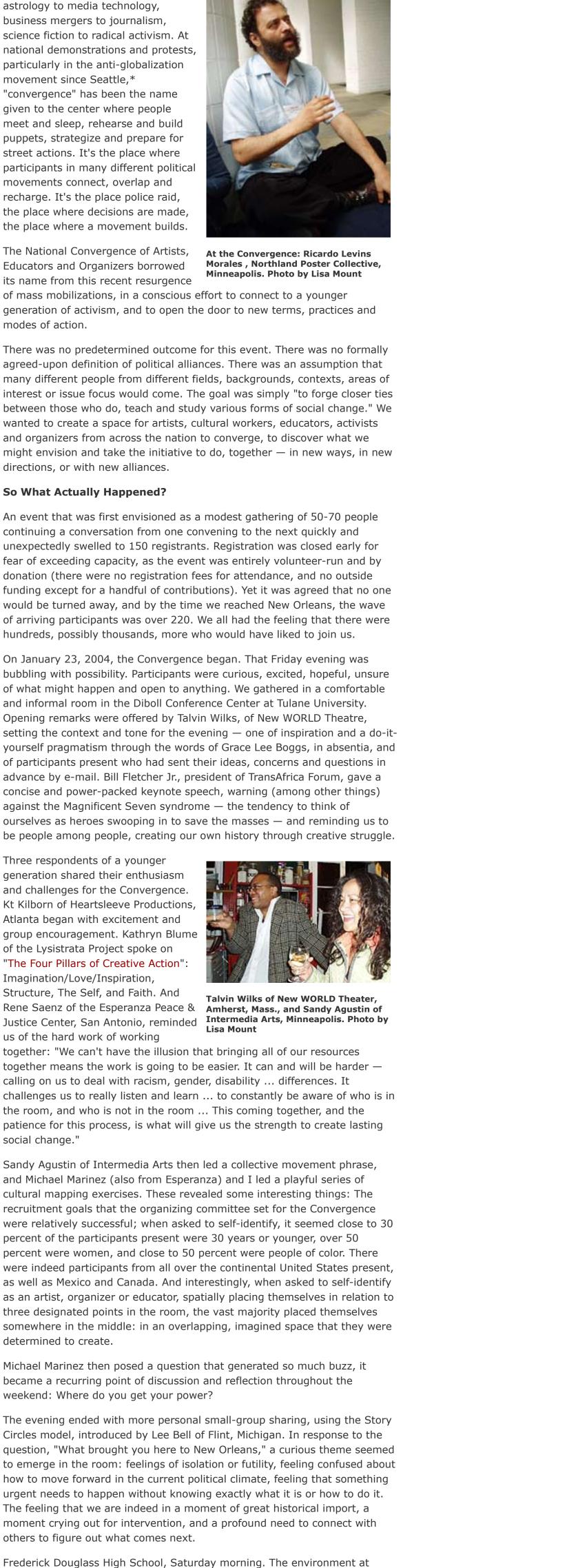
Jason Mellad, New Orleans Organizing Committee Lisa Mount, Artistic Logistics Curtis Muhammad, Color Line Project/Community Labor United John O'Neal, Color Line Project and Junebug Productions Carolyn Pierre, Tulane University Jim Randels, Color Line Project and Douglass High School Graciela Sanchez, Esperanza Peace & Justice Center Michael Marinez, Esperanza Peace and Justice Center Mathew Schwarzman, National Performance Network Hamilton Simons-Jones, Tulane University MK Wegmann, National Performance Network Talvin Wilks, New WORLD Theater Megan Finn, New Orleans Organizing Committee Rene Saenz, Esperanza Peace & Justice Center Original CAN/API publication: February 2004 **Comments**

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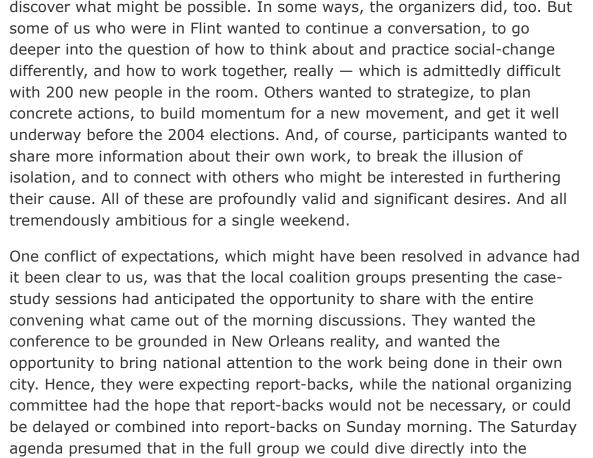
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flowing smoothly. People who couldn't afford hotels had places to stay, transportation was provided free of charge (for early risers), and the food was delicious. The national organizing committee had done a great job, too, it seemed, with a tight and practical agenda that was running more or less on time. There were bulletin boards and announcement tables provided, documentation teams in place, and an open list posted for participants to write what they were working against, and what they were working for. Following lunch, report-backs from the morning sessions began — and continued, and continued, and continued. Here we encountered a conflict of expectations. We did eventually get to the afternoon strategy sessions that were on the agenda via a modified Open



essence of the questions, issues and actions raised for further discussion and strategizing in the afternoon. But the truth is, once you hand someone the mic, you never know what's really going to happen, and precedent sets itself. This reveals that, even among a self-assembled group of some of the most experienced and skilled arts organizers in the country, a very basic

pitfall can open up and swallow the best of intentions: the issue of

communication between local and visiting partners, and what Bill Fletcher forewarned against in his opening speech — Magnificent Seven syndrome. Somewhere, there was a synapse — a near, but missed, connection between the needs of the local community groups and the agenda of the

national team. And the funny thing is, we all know better. We all know about needs assessment, equitable relations, listening, developing partnerships. We all think and write about it all the time, we all claim it in our practice. So

around saying we're all in the same movement. Or maybe multiple movements, connected and supporting one another — converging — is really the point. On Saturday morning, we sang freedom songs from the Civil Rights era. And some folks said, that's pretty, but it's not my movement. Chicanos weren't in there. Muslims and atheists felt alienated by the Christian spiritual base of the aesthetic. Young participants saw a piece of the past not connected to

their current realities (quite honestly, "This Little Light of Mine" seems a far cry from "Freedom's got a shotgun and ain't afraid to use it," a line from one of the Black Out Arts performance pieces). And the funny thing is, we knew that would happen. We talked about it at length during the planning process. And it happened anyway. The challenge of making space for multiple voices, aesthetics, modes of learning and expression, structures of organization is

precisely where we are now: HOW to actually do it, and do it better.

The night before the Convergence, there was a planning meeting at Ashe Cultural Center. It went on for over three hours, because this discussion was already deeply embedded in every choice. John O'Neal eloquently and passionately argued that we'll never work out how to work together unless we know what we're working on. We have to get down to action, and in the process of doing, we'll have to figure how to do it better, in

stepped away from the table at times and came back again. Curtis Muhammad took the lovely road of leading by following. Many of these issues were raised, and though we didn't all agree, we all could feel that if we proceeded with the agenda we had — a Sunday morning of more reportbacks and strategy sessions — we risked killing the energy and momentum of the gathering, and eating our time together without going deeper. We set about restructuring the final day of the Convergence. Six hours later, over a dinner of fried okra, crawfish etouffeé and rum-soaked bread pudding at a local soul-food restaurant — Sandy Agustin, Talvin Wilks, Mitty Owens and I were finalizing the (still flexible) plan for the morning. We had been selected by the group as the facilitators for Sunday, and had agreed to keep working, and to share the outline with the rest of the organizing committee in the morning — at Dillard University, half an hour before the event was to begin — to check in and ratify what was about to happen. It went like this:

Opening announcement of the shift in schedule, by Talvin & Andrea:

• Lisa Mount & MK Wegmann do logistics, and a performance interpretation of the Saturday strategy-session report-backs,

• The Education Reform Strategy group introduces and requests

Douglass Coalition) regarding the conditions of Douglass High

sitting near you, preferably someone you don't know)

ratification of a petition (drafted by John Malpede & supported by the

 Partner dialogue, facilitated by Sandy Agustin — Drawing and sharing your strongest impression of the Convergence so far (with a person

Performative reading & improvisation of the group list: What are we

Sandy & Mitty lead group movement on stage — Walking, partner

exchange, circle: Get with the people you really need to talk to, to go

working against? What are we working for? (by volunteers) • Rene & Andrea frame the discussion for the day: The challenge &

"Convergence isn't easy! Flow with us ..." Black Out Arts Collective (performance)

including proposed next steps

concept of Convergence

hope."

immediate action. Did it take us deeper into issues and dialogue? Did we take a step toward imagining new ways to work together? Honestly, I'm not My (admittedly limited) observation was that many of the groups broke out and organized themselves around previously existing and familiar identities. Some groups were intentional about it, and felt that's what they most needed to do, such as the South Asian group, which was busy sharing

resources and planning possible convenings in different parts of the country. Another group entirely comprised white female theater artists, and I'm not even sure if they realized their own self-selected homogeny. One large and

returned to the question of where we find power, converged around Graciela Sanchez — because another woman of color approached her and said, "I want hope. You're Esperanza, and I need to talk to you, because I want

But for better or worse, what I realized at some point — late that Saturday night, during the Performance Salon hosted by Jose Torres — was we were doing it. The organizing committee was actually doing it. Through continued work together over a period of time (for some months, for others years), we were able to go deeper and get to the tough places together. We were doing what we encouraged participants at the Convergence to do: to push beyond our comfort zones and go somewhere uncharted. We were enacting the

tensions inherent in bringing together educators, organizers and artists: the

tensions among the drive toward deeper understanding, the strategizetoward-urgent-action drive, and the imagine-new-worlds drive. We were doing the hard work of converging. We didn't find all the answers in one

passionately engaged group that did tug at the roots of division, and

Coalition created an amazing collective of people, organizations and practitioners who will continue to work together. Steve Bailey of Jump-Start Performance Co., San Many participants came Antonio, and Normando Ismay of Café Bizzoso, Atlanta, on the Dillard University campus away with new insights, new partnerships and new

and his work acknowledged in the same space, at the same moment: as an

rights and natural resources, and against the homogenization of global cultures for the sake movement are against genuine global exchange of culture, knowledge, resources, etc.) Also, I am referring here to the famous December 1999 protests against the WTO meeting in Seattle, Wash., which sparked a resurgence of political demonstration and direct action in the United Andrea Assaf, Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts Caron Atlas, Independent Consultant Euna August, New Orleans Organizing Committee

Amy Koritz, Tulane University Alice Lovelace, Atlanta Partnership for Arts in Learning

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collaboration and community-based arts. She has a master's degree in performance studies and a BFA in acting, both from NYU. With a training background in theater, she works as a solo and collaborating artist creating original multidisciplinary performances, residencies and workshops for people of all ages. Andrea currently works as program associate for Animating Democracy (a program of Americans for the Arts). She is a member of The Writers Roundtable in NYC, and a member of Alternate ROOTS. Click here for responses of other participants in the Convergence. Local hosts for the Convergence included Junebug Productions, Douglass Community Coalition, Douglass High School, Tulane University and Dillard University. The National

Lee Bell, Neighborhood Roundtable Stanlyn Breve, National Performance Network David Carson, New Orleans Organizing Committee Jan Clifford, National Performance Network Deanne Feaster, New Orleans Organizing Committee

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