

REFUSING TO CHOOSE

“Creativity is the key to unlock human liberation.” -Grace Lee Boggs

The quote above is the value that guides my life’s work, and most likely yours too if you are reading this book.

Yet somehow almost everywhere I turn I am being asked, more like forced, to choose between my creative practice and my community work.

How do we navigate this torrential downpour of false dichotomies, and somehow avoid sliding further down the slippery slope of compartmentalizing our lives into disconnected fragments? How do we bring our whole interconnected selves to the journey, without sacrificing a major part of who we are at every turn?

I refuse to choose.

At first it was an endless battle between the two, an attempt to balance them as if they were separate entities. But then they start blurring and blending in ways I couldn’t have imagined until I experienced it. I’ve collaborated with artists and communities who weave social justice movement building and creativity into a seamless fabric. Here are a few ways I’ve learned to articulate the spaces in my life where I no longer feel forced to decide between them:

1. Advocate/Educate.

Storytelling is the most powerful method of shaping perception, and therefore reality. Too often the voices of those who are most impacted by an issue, the experts of that experience, are the ones whose stories disappear. As artists we not only communicate our own story, but more importantly we amplify the stories of those around us. Our storytelling is a way to raise awareness and educate people about the overlooked nuances and to advocate for a self-determined solution by those who are most impacted. English is my second language, and I not only learned English from listening to hip-hop and writing down the lyrics, I also was immersed in frames of reference and collection of stories that weren’t being taught in school. This understanding of the power of music to advocate and educate is the most basic way any artist can refuse to choose.

I utilized this method when Finale and I co-wrote the song “Locusts” about gentrification and unsustainable development practices in Detroit. The song process involved interviewing dozens of community members and including their stories in our verses. We then went back and interviewed them again on camera to highlight their voices in a docu-music-video. This piece of art has been central in our efforts to educate people in our community and beyond about the issues of gentrification and speculation plaguing Detroit, and to call for community led development in the city.

2. Heal/Energize.

Physical and emotional fatigue is an epidemic for organizers and independent artists. We internalize the trauma that is prevalent in the communities we live and work in. Art that is deeply tuned in to that dynamic is poised to become a salve, a healing force. It recharges our batteries so that we can continue to do this important yet seemingly endless work.

“Keep Going”, off my album *Shapeshifters*, is a song that writes itself every time I perform it. By asking people what keeps them going when they are on the verge of giving up, I build up a word bank to freestyle from. Performing the song reciprocally feeds my spirit and the audience’s. We build a forcefield of strength and protection through the call-and-response exchange and mantra of the chorus chant “I keep going”.

And it's not just our own creations that comfort us; we are part of a field of healing art. “Don’t You Worry ‘Bout a Thing” by Stevie Wonder is one of my first thoughts when I seek safety in the midst of horror and tragedy. What is a song or work of art that gets you through crisis? How as artists can we create art that is both healing for us while we make it and for those who engage with it? How can we facilitate the process of others creating that healing for them?

3. Transform/Metamorphose.

A flock of starlings is called a murmuration. Murmurations don't have one clear leader, but instead are constantly rotating their leadership so no one bird has to take the brunt of the wind and burn out. The patterns they create emerge into unexpected pointillism paintings in the sky. Similarly, our movements through art and activism have the potential to co-create new realities. To value everyone as an artist, to be creative at facing challenges; to blur the line between creative expression and creating change in our lives and communities, beyond who is traditionally thought of as an artist.

When I was 20 years old I began working with Detroit Summer. Founded by Grace Lee and Jimmy Boggs, Shea Howell, and many others, Detroit Summer is a youth led intergenerational and multiracial collective dedicated to creative and sustainable solutions. In response to the 78% dropout rate in our city (which we viewed as students walking out against a system that is failing them) we germinated the Live Arts Media Project. In LAMP we begin with questions, developed by the youth facilitators, who then ask these questions of each other and their community using media to document their voices. The stories collected inform and inspire our creative process, collaborating and co-creating media, music, art and new narratives, workshops, and campaigns to apply this to creative action. Whether the outcome is a multimedia mural tour, an audio-hip-hop-documentary, or a t-shirt campaign, the process itself is the focus. We are all transformed by the co-facilitated murmuration of liberatory education. We were no longer just naming the injustices of the school system, but more importantly envisioning and practicing the possibilities. As an old friend once told me, the ultimate critique is embodying the solution.

“The splitting of the atom changed everything but the human mind and thus we drift towards catastrophe.”

“Imagination is more important than education”

Grace introduced me to these two Einstein quotes, which illuminate for me how we as artists and cultural workers help share the gift of making the impossible possible. Every time we create we are shifting the paradigm that the world is inevitable and determined to be unjust, we are keeping the human spirit of resistance and resilience alive.

When I was a Leeway panelist I had never applied for an arts grant before. I was intimidated and thought that my work as a hip-hop artist and activist wouldn't be highbrow enough to receive any awards outside of a pound after a show or respect in the hip-hop community, and maybe a couple good reviews. I thought grants and fellowships were only for artists who had MFAs and training and obscure art history references to drop. And then I was I asked to sit on a panel, reading through hundreds of heartfelt applications that were nearly impossible to choose between. That gave me the courage to afterward apply for my first fellowship, and then another, and now several grants. I could have never imagined taking that route prior to sitting on the Leeway Transformation Award panel. I witnessed the ecology of the Philly/Camden/Delaware Valley artists working to transform their communities. In this book you will see the beautiful spectrum of artists and activists using their work not as propaganda for social movements but as an ongoing mutual transformational process. Leeway nurtures an interconnected path where you no longer have to choose.

***Invincible** is a Detroit-based artist and activist whose spitfire wordplay has received acclaim from fans all across the world, while their active involvement in progressive social change has taken their music beyond entertainment toward actualizing the change they wish to see. As a co-founder of EMERGENCE Media, they released their debut album ShapeShifters (2008) and produced award-winning videos like The Revival (2009) about women in hip-hop, and Locusts (2008) exploring displacement and gentrification in Detroit. In addition to their work as a performing artist, for the last decade Invincible has worked with Detroit Summer, a multi-racial, inter-generational collective in Detroit that is transforming communities through youth facilitative leadership, creativity and collective action. They were also the co-coordinator and co-founder of the Detroit Future Youth network to support social justice and media-based youth projects throughout the city. Invincible is currently working with renown producer Waajeed, multimedia artist and creative technologist Carlos Garcia, and visual artist Wesley Taylor, on Complex Movements, an interactive multimedia installation-based hip-hop collective exploring the relationship between complex sciences and social justice movements.*