

# Perspectives on Flint: Moving a Community to Change

ANIMATING  
DEMOCRACY

**SESSION DESCRIPTION:** Flint is a city that is working hard for change. It can boast significant citizen efforts, anti-racism coalitions, public and foundation investments, community art projects, and the development of its cultural assets. But change is hard, progress is slow, and both setbacks and gains can create challenges. Many community-building efforts in recent years seek to create a “new story” for Flint by increasing citizen engagement and connection. This session will feature an open conversation among community insiders who participate in and provide leadership for community change initiatives and outside artists and consultants who have been invited to bring their creativity and ideas to help Flint build a brighter future. These insiders and outsiders will share their individual assessments of opportunities and barriers to change in Flint, the role of story and the arts, and the challenge of coordinating and building effective partnerships and creating synergy.

**PRESENTERS:** *Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Urban Bush Women; John O’Neal, Junebug Productions; Richard Harwood, The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation*

**RESPONDENTS:** *Artina Sadler, Flint Cultural Center; Gloria Coles, Flint Public Library; Karen Jennings, Flint School of Performing Arts*

**MODERATOR:** *Vic Papale, Community Foundation of Greater Flint*

**Vic Papale:** The panel will talk first about their individual assessments of opportunities and barriers to change in a community context, the role of the story in the arts, and then the challenge of coordinating and building effective partnerships, and of creating synergy, in communities.

**Jawole Willa Jo Zollar:** Urban Bush Women (UBW), based in Brooklyn, New York, has developed the tagline of “sassy, strong, and relevant.” With this tagline, UBW brought to Flint empowered images of African American women being at the table where community decisions are made and addressing issues that are facing the community. Often artists brought in for the entertainment value, we can be more: catalysts for dialogue and part of the dialogue. While we were in Flint, we involved eight local artists and eight teachers (paid to participate by the Flint Cultural Center) in an ongoing planning process. Our process enabled the artists and teachers to be a part of the revitalization of Flint using art. This made real the values of Harwood’s study of community.. We made the artists and teachers part of revitalizing Flint using the arts and Harwood’s study of community engagement, *Creating A New Story*.

We were involved in creation of a micro-lending project, a series of 16 small grants that could cycle through the community and give people a chance to get their own creative efforts off the ground. As a result, we (the outsider) were no longer the catalyst; the impetus for the work became local. Further, we created a performance using talent outside the mainstream of the Flint cultural institutions. Working together with groups including The Flintstone Hoofers and students from Berston Field House’s Hip Hop program, we helped them understand what talent they had.

**John O’Neal:** The Color Line Project is about the power and the value of story, and the value of a coherent community. We, as artists, have been segregated from our roles as citizens and “elevated” because of the value of art in the economy. When the artist feeds society-at-large work reflecting the value of the commercial society, this serves to pacify the needs of public. We need to connect to each other rather than assume the roles handed to us by the powers that be. As artists, we can be a useful catalyst in our communities wherever we are.

Color Line is about reconstructing communities and relationships with each other. “The problem of the 20th century will be the problem of the Color Line.” (WEB DuBois, 1903)—that is to say, the relationship between the lighter peoples of the world to the darker peoples of the world. The gap between the living conditions of black and white people is growing in every dimension and harder to see because our circles are homogeneous; we only relate to people who are like ourselves. If we can get people telling stories about their experience and impact of the civil rights movement as a result of the project, we will reconnect to that significant organizing experience, which is about to be forgotten, and find models, lessons, and approaches that will permit us to carry on with direction, knowledge, and power.

Ultimately, we need to be finding out what it is that sustains people on the bottom of the social ladder and ground ourselves in their interests. We need to identify with those who are exploited and build our experience out of this. The job of the artists and educators is the question, “How do we make our lives, our homes, our neighborhoods, our communities better?” We are granted by our society time to reflect and practice skills to make it better.

**Richard Harwood:** We believe this country can do better; we have a lot of unfinished work to do. And we will not be able to do this work without robust public life. We need to re-construct our approach to civic life. Every message we get tells us to be consumers. Now we think we can return our schools or our citizenship the way we can return merchandise. In Flint, the question became “Can we redeem hope?” Will we step over the threshold from our private selves, private needs, and private lives to the public? I’ve been in Flint since 1995, which is a long time. It’s a tough community. You can’t do this work with an exit strategy. When I first arrived, there were too many anti-norms in the community. People didn’t want to work together. People said one thing and did another. We needed to dislodge them from this cycle. We tried to develop new norms of civic engagement, self trust (not personal efficacy but collective beliefs of trusting one another), more awareness of what do we believe together, what can we do together.

There were two competing narratives in the community. The first was “Things can’t happen here.” And the newer narrative was “Things can happen here.” In the majority of the community, the old belief held tighter than the new, and it was easy for the notion that things could change to lose ground. Could we muster enough civic strength to turn people to the new narrative? What could it mean to be civically engaged?

Before the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, enslaved people sang *Freed at Last*—with the lyrics, “I thought my soul would rise and fly.” They sang the song for pure hope before they would be free because they knew things would get better. Similarly, people who engage in the process today hold the hope of hearing a story that will be meaningful to them, not something drawn up by outsiders.

**Karen Jennings:** I manage the dance program at the Flint School of Performing Arts. When John O’Neal first came to Flint, we worked with him on the Color Line Project. First, the dancers participated in Story Circles. Young dancers came for a session with John, talked about injustice, and put the stories they heard into movement. Then they wrote about the stories and made a libretto for a dance; from then on, it got uncomfortable. The dancers formed three groups and each was assigned a color. The groups were set in dramatic conflict (they knew it was a metaphor for race).

**Artina Sadler:** The UBW project took two years: good things take time and planning. What took time was the core work of getting the community to follow and understand a vision they couldn’t see. And once they saw it, they didn’t think they could do it. In the core community I heard, “I just don’t know where we are going.” And replied, “Trust me we’ll get there.” After the last performance, they all came up to me crying. They saw the connection of the work to their lives. There was this desire, a need to make sure they could continue to meet. Now they meet every fourth Friday, at their initiative.

The Color Line Project bridged into the community at the beginning and the connections still run deep. They collected stories with the help of FACTER (Flint Area Citizens To End Racism), a grassroots faith-based action team founded by people in different religious organizations. Then, the YWCA put story circles in their curriculum. People tell stories in there they haven’t told their family, and they’ll hug people from their story circle from two years ago. Some teachers are even using story circles in their classroom.

## **RESPONSES**

**Richard Harwood:** The danger in community work is the urge to coordinate everything. We can work in complementary ways, or we can all work together and do things my way—this idea that “You’ve got to get in my car or there’s no ride for you.” Maintaining independence is crucial to the health of organizations and the community purpose.

**Cindy Ornstein, Flint Cultural Center:** We’re not forcing connections, but making opportunities for them. Then, as time passes, new circles of people expand in geometric proportion because people start getting fired up about the creative process. They realize they are able to do for themselves. More so, it can be a resource issue. For example, we

had too many stories collected by the Color Line Project. So, we found extra money for UBW so they could use extra stories in their method.

**Deborah Kohl, Senior Minister of University Church:** On my first day back here from vacation, I was reluctant to return. But when I saw the Urban Bush Women performance on that first day, the allegory of the city, I remembered the “click” of the community and reconnected with my life here.

**Jawole Jo Willa Zollar:** *(She explained the allegory.)* Participants were asked to write a fable to represent the town. The one they chose, called *There was once a place called Flint*, was of a forest of bounty. Soon, a drought came and people gave up and moved away. One animal called Hope stayed and cried, and her tears replenished the forest. This fable symbolized the effort and result that hope brought to the community.

**Erica Block, Walk & Squawk Performance Project:** The difference between Flint and Detroit is that the strength of Flint lies in the fact that it is a smaller town with “blue chip” funders that are willing to go in new direction and commit to long-term projects. Where does the funding and support for these unknown long-term projects come from?

**Curtis Muhammad, Color Line Project:** Every family lost a job in this town during de-industrialization (190,000 city population, 70,000 jobs gone). The local funders addressed the crisis by changing their direction (for good or bad); they stopped giving money for organizing, but gave it to cultural arts.

**Lee Bell, Neighborhood Roundtable:** Flint residents lost their jobs but, as a result, gained opportunities from organizations like the Cultural Center and the local universities. We transplanted our creativity from our jobs in the auto industry to the arts. Flint has come to be known as a place where people want to learn the things we’re doing—like our community education program. Instead of buying into the negativity of the media, we’re changing our community through projects like Color Line and Urban Bush Women.

**Vic Papale:** When I arrived in Flint six years ago, I kept hearing the same story: “You understand Flint, it’s ruled by three huge institutions: General Motors, United Auto Workers, and the Mott Foundation.” But over time, I learned there is an amazing pluralism of creativity and activity here. There was probably a struggle between those three institutions and the wealthy members of the community. But connection developed between the pluralism of the community and the institutions, the Cultural Center, and the universities you just heard about. The United Auto Workers were supporting some projects, and even General Motors was, to some extent. The point is there was a percolation going on. Now, it would be interesting to find out if people arriving here in Flint are hearing the same mantra. If they’re not, it may be an indication of change in the community.

**Richard Harwood:** The Mott Foundation came to me saying that their investments in Flint were not working. I helped them take a new role as a catalyst for the community, not doing what the Foundation decided (i.e., not letting foundations impose their will upon the communities, but letting others help set the funding agenda). For Mott, it was a big risk and a different way for foundations to impact communities. When communities begin change they first hit an impasse. Then things bubble up, and the powerful organizations see the light (and change as well).

**Vic Papale:** I just want to clarify the numbers you just heard for those people not from Flint. By no means do I want to diminish the impact, but there are actually 420,000 people total in Genessee County, and we were all affected by the changes in the motor industry.

**Cindy Ornstein:** There’s a difference between planning and implementation. We at the Cultural Center now believe the only way to go is to get a planning grant first from the Community Foundation before trying to fund any community change project. There was a one to a one and one-half year process, with the artist to bring the changes here. And as the community decided what to do, buy-in came during planning process. As a result, we wrote a powerful proposal, proving buy-in with the collaboration we had in place, which was important because the implementation is expensive. Further, this approach also gave us a longer time to raise money.

**Ron Butler, United Way of Genessee County:** I grew up in Flint in the 1950s, which were really the best days for the city. Another huge institution (in addition to the big three) was our own blue-collar identity. We believed that ours was a blue-collar town, and we held an aggressive (lowbrow) belief that there was no culture here and that there

were no possibilities. During the hard times that followed, the people who left Flint were the ones who believed in this false myth. The ones who stayed now share the knowledge that there was always more to Flint than that.

**John O’Neal:** The wealth of the society comes from the bottom and the power comes from the bottom. Myths that serve and recreate the system come from the bottom. When the institutions to which this power has been entrusted begin to think they are the source of the power, they drift off and become self-serving. Then, there is profound social change. The answer to the corrupt power is the people. Power concedes nothing without struggle.

**Suzanne Lacy, artist:** Art is really powerful. It can create things that weren’t there before, like conversations between police and youth. But when I go to do the programs, my challenge is to find ways to sustain that dialogue without me and to actually make changes in the culture of the agencies or systems that I’m trying to change. How do you embed the programs where you have done the work?

**Vic Papale:** Mott did something where they brought 30 people at a time together for two days of talking about undoing racism. When all these groups finished the program, they made FACTER, and now they have this grassroots institution to address racism in every area of public policy, and it’s owned by 20 organizations in Flint.

**Maribel Alvarez, MACLA:** Artists are the emergency response workers for the socio-economic system. We put ourselves in the position of dealing with the damage done by the changing economic infrastructure.

**Rich Harwood:** I’m responding to Suzanne’s question. Different kinds of civic organizations build with different practices or missions. Within this, there is evidence of division from people within the community. To do this work, it is necessary to link and infuse organizations with civic ideas and practices.

**Cindy Ornstein:** Another answer to Suzanne’s question is that power sharing creates core groups of citizens who share the decision-making power among themselves. If you transfer a project to a community board, it doesn’t matter if the key person leaves.