 Watching the Watchers Keynote Speech  
“Practicing Liberation”  
By Ejeris Dixon  
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How many folks are excited to end police violence?  
How many folks are excited to build a world without police?  
How many folks here like their politics a little complicated, a little messy?

Good morning my name is Ejeris Dixon and I just want to say thank you to Mariame Kaba, Project Nia, We Charge Genocide and all of the organizers of the Watching the Watchers conference. I am thankful and honored to build with you all today. I have to say that this conference is needed and brilliant. At such a critical point in time at the intersections of many movements: Black Lives Matter, Police Violence, and Transformative Justice Movements it is crucial that we take time to reflect, build skills, and reconnect.

In the last two years, as a movement we’ve mobilized around some very tragic murders. And out of the mobilizations we now we find ourselves with some incredible opportunities. As someone who’s been in organizing for quite a while, i’m acquainted with the ebb and flow of movement energy as it rises up around a particular moment and eventually leavens. During these times its up to organizers and long term activists to forge ahead, to keep space, to hold momentum. Thank you to everyone on the front lines for the ability to keep up the energy of this movement, for saying we will shut shit down, that it is not business as usual, that black lives matter, and that black deaths will not be in vain.

This sustained momentum, in itself, is nothing short of a victory.

I know that there are some people who are concerned by a “rise” in police violence. I have to say that I don't think there's a rise in police violence, black bodies have experienced police violence and state repression for generations. I do believe that we are experiencing a level of sustained public attention and outcry that is unprecedented and unparalleled within the United States. This attention is critical because not only does it allow our message to reach people who are unaffected by this issue, but it allows us to reach people who are directly affected by this issue, who may not be politically active. Not everyone is an organizer, not everyone is active, some people react to trauma by disassociating and disconnecting, some people aren’t able to risk arrest, leave work, and marches and rallies are inaccessible for many people.

Yet we have people coming into the movement who have never attended a protest, we’re seeing people strive for respectful cross-generational collaborations, we’re seeing attempts at shared credit and shared labor between grassroots formations and established institutions, we’re seeing people struggling and working to build more inclusive
movements through highlighting the leadership of women, recognizing violence against black trans and gender non-conforming people as a form of anti-black violence, and integrating healing justice work within our organizing strategies.

And that's a victory.

We have a president's commission on policing, where on the ground organizers and activists are not only on the commission but presenting to the commission. People are being heard by and debating with police chiefs. I'm clear we know that true change doesn’t come from that room, but getting in that room, well that's a victory too.

Perhaps you’re wondering why I’m naming these “small” victories. I’m naming them because I’m acquainted with the fact that these victories were a long time coming. I understand the effort that it takes to start these conversations, to build common ground, to through down together, to disrupt, to reconvene, and to keep doing it again and again. A key to our sustainability is not just in recognizing what we’re fighting against but in celebrating how far we’ve come.

All of these moments have led me to think, what happens if we win? Looking at the trajectory of this work, the institutional, grassroots, and cultural victories, as a pragmatist, it’s the question on my mind.

This led me to ponder an entirely different question

When black lives matter does that mean that black people are free?

Really think about it, so our lives matter, so people pay attention when we die, maybe there are grand jury indictments and actual legal and material consequences against the police. Does that create black liberation? Does that create a renowned sense of freedom and dignity as we walk down the street at night? Do we stop sleeping as close to our phones, do we no longer need people to text us when they get home, do we no longer raise our children, party, and love under a constant state of hyper vigilance?

In short, are we able to focus on thriving as opposed to focusing on surviving? Because if that’s true, if we’re about to get black freedom, let a sista know. I want to be ready with my black freedom outfit. I gotta call the hair dresser and get black freedom hair.

Yet, from my perspective the answer is no. And its not a critical no, or even a challenging no because fundamentally framing the message as black lives matter is brilliant. It’s forward looking, it’s simple and aspirational, and it places us on the proactive journey and struggle towards our full humanity.

But when black lives matter, we will not be free, but we will be on our way towards freedom.
I believe this distinction is critical so that we don’t confuse a message with a goal. The goal is the fundamental restructuring of our society. And within this society we not only no longer need police, we no longer need prisons, and people have the tools and supports that they need to live full dignified lives. In this liberated world we have new ways to address harm, trauma, and we are able to support people to shift and transform harmful behaviors. In this new world resources are not allocated based on identity.

We can call this shift revolution, abolition, or we can even call this radical reform. At this point I worry that these important distinctions are unnecessarily dividing like-minded people from critical collaborations. We need to move this conversation from being pro or anti-reform because our silos aren’t saving us. And the folks who are creating strategic collaborations are the ones winning.

Our ability to utilize the Black Lives Matter Movement as a stepping stone to black liberation, and within that an inclusive black liberation that includes the liberation of black queer folks, the liberation of black trans and gender non-conforming folks, black immigrants, black people with disabilities, black young people, and ultimately all oppressed people… hinges upon our ability as a community to practice living within our vision. It’s about practicing liberation in our meetings, demands, actions, events, and allowing the experiences of freedom and liberation to become so deeply intertwined with how we live, breathe, and treat each other. We will not be prepared to lead and live within this new society without practicing liberation today.

I learned a lot of my lessons on how to practice liberation and the pitfalls of not doing so, while I was at the Audre Lorde Project. Ten years ago I got hired to work at the Audre Lorde Project. The organization was in the process of creating a campaign to address violence against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer communities of color in Bed-Stuy, a predominantly black neighborhood in Brooklyn. I was charged with supporting a community to create safety without relying upon the police. I said, “sure I could do that.” Yall know the way that you make false promises in your interview, and afterwards you’re like what does that mean?

So we started with the things that seemed clear. In order to create safety we needed to talk to, align, and organize, the queer and trans people of color who lived in the neighborhood. We spent a year hosting community meetings, researching, and brainstorming what would safety look like, what would freedom look like? We did outreach everywhere from house parties, to the club, to people recruiting their friends, their lovers, their exes.

We researched our own personal histories and began to talk to our families about safety strategies. We knew historically that very few people of color had relied on law enforcement for safety, particularly if we were to go back a generation. So we talked to our mothers, our grandmothers, about their safety strategies and brought those stories to the group, whether or not those strategies occurred here or in other countries.
In my family my parents are both from Louisiana, and they grew up under segregation. My mom talked to me about how there was an informal system to address neighborhood violence. There were some older men who had some standing in the community, a doctor, a teacher, a minister, etc. There was a family that often was having domestic/intimate partner violence at their home. These men would come over and ask to speak to the “man” of the house. They would say, “We can't have this in our community.” And they would ask him, “what do you need from us to change?” I was super excited to replicate that idea without the patriarchy.

We also researched other campaigns, frantically searching for something that didn’t exist. During that time many of the other documented community accountability and transformative justice campaigns were connected to intimate partner violence, child sexual abuse, sexual violence, forms of violence when there is some sort of relationship between the person causing harm and the person experiencing harm. We were sure that we were going to find the other program or campaign out there working on approaches to anti-LGBTQ violence without relying on the police, or at least someone else working on community approaches to violence between strangers.

After a year of looking for the thing that didn’t exist, we stopped looking for ourselves in the reflections of others. We were the first that we knew of to address stranger based violence using community based protocols. We eventually settled on the idea that since violence disrupts community ties, particularly for queer and trans folks within the neighborhood, we wanted to work to rebuild the role of queer and trans people of color within our neighborhoods and communities. We started with recruiting neighborhood businesses and organizations and asking them if they would prevent violence within their spaces, or harbor people running from violence. We explained that our folks were experiencing intersecting forms of violence, violence from the community and the police. When we explicitly named our experiences with police violence many of our spaces and allies understood because police violence was a constant issue within Bed-Stuy. We literally thought through the process of the neighborhood ending it’s reliance on the police and addressing harm and violence as a community and created steps. First we’d recruit friendly spaces/institutions, then we’d use those spaces to recruit or challenge non-friendly spaces, we’d work to create emergency support teams or services for the community such as safety squads (where people who live near each other build relationships to support each other through violence) or independent ambulances. We thought that this would lay the groundwork for community councils or tribunals to hold people who cause harm accountable, and that this would get us closer to freedom.

We created everything from our lived experiences. To create this campaign we needed resources that didn’t exist yet. There was no “How to be safe without the police” guide for queer and trans people of color, so we created one. From our lives and trial and error, from our safest and most frightening moments, we turned our stories and our survival into critical and necessary resources. We knew the resources we created weren’t perfect or extensive but they were based on what we tried. So we asked folks to revise, edit, and add to our resources and send us their feedback.
Through this experience I learned that when practicing liberation within our organizing, we have to step outside these useless, circular arguments pitting visionary goals against concrete winnable campaigns. We find ourselves in these camps – one anti-campaign and people who act like campaigns are the only social justice strategy. I believe that it’s a both and instead of an either or. We must work to create practical steps towards an aspirational vision, like we did with the Safe Neighborhood Campaign. Simply put we must ask ourselves do the initiatives, programs, and campaigns that we’re working on lead us toward our vision. It’s a process that many of us call strategic alignment, and I have the privilege walking organizations through this, on a daily basis. Therefore to practice liberation in this moment we have to ensure that there is a strategic link between our current campaigns, events, and mobilizations and black liberation.

To get to the world we believe in, we have to invest in and at times deepen our strategy. As a movement we spend a lot of time on analysis. We spend a lot of time convincing people, why the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) is messed up. Analysis is critical but we would also be even more convincing if we deepened the time that we spend creating strategy to end the PIC. I would love folks to ask themselves as they go through today’s workshops, how does the strategy of their current work move us toward liberation? And if it doesn’t, what changes are needed?

When talking about strategy I am directly challenging the critique that I’ve heard recently that our movements are too focused on winning. I don’t believe we have the luxury to lose. The consequences of our movement work are life or death. We are the living survivors of our genocide, of the genocide of black people, black queer people, and black trans people. We are not supposed to be here, as Audre Lorde says, “we were never meant to survive.” Strategy is a key to our liberation and by practicing strategy we are practicing liberation.

When we focus on our strategy it also allows us to create collaborations with more of the left. How many folks saw Selma? What I really enjoyed about that movie is the focus on strategy. There was a part with Malcolm and Coretta when they discussed aligning their various strategies. Using Malcolm to scare the white power structure into King’s demands. Imagine if we utilized prison reform and abolition to the same ends, it’s completely possible, there’s even a term for it, an inside and outside game. As we focus on strategy we don’t need to look for people with specialized experience, the truth is our communities are full of strategists, they’re called hustlers. When you peel away the shield of bravado from hustler mentality you’re left with the ability to go from A - B with very few resources. Follow them, support them, recruit them, and let them lead.

Practicing liberation within our organizing is also about creating and holding ourselves accountable to concrete outcomes. I know that when I talk about this many of us have experienced this concept within deeply oppressive, non-profit industrial complex scenarios. We’ve all been there in those terrible site visits, when our organizations perform modest to extreme forms of minstrelcy for foundations in order to survive. Here I’m talking about something a bit different. Concrete and measurable outcomes allow us to hold ourselves accountable for what we are doing with our social justice resources. Movement work is often built off layers and layers of sacrifice. We have to be
responsible and accountable to the time, not just of the progressive activists, but everyone who’s sacrificed for our organizing. If we’re asking people to put their lives, livelihoods, and health on the line we have to be accountable to that gift.

In this new liberated world that we are creating, we have not eradicated disagreement or difference. While building the S.O.S. Collective we lived the idea that the space was for our entire community, regardless of politics or political exposure. We had members who were in the military, survivors of violence, immigrants, newcomers to Bed-Stuy, folks who’d lived in Bed-Stuy for generations, a mix of educational backgrounds, and various class backgrounds. We worked intentionally for all us to recognize how our experiences of privilege and oppression impacted our participation. Despite our multi-layered differences we worked to find loving ways to stay in relationship with each other while challenging each other when needed. People had to take the time to be multi-dimensional and self-reflective because power and privilege within that space was constantly shifting. In fact some of the members who had the deepest experiences of violence we’re not necessarily drawn to the politics of community accountability and transformative justice.

At one point we worked with a mother who had lost her child in a brutal murder. She was very clear that she was interested in finding and prosecuting the person who had killed her child. We marched with her and supported her despite our political differences. We even had activists from other cities asking us if we changed our stance on criminalization because we were supporting her. We were clear, we didn’t have to agree on everything to form a strategic alliance. And if working with a black mother who lost her child wasn’t our issue, I’m not sure what else was.

What I’ve found over time is that often ideas about people who have good and bad politics are often a yardstick for education, class privilege, and/or political exposure. As a movement we need to make more room and space for people to learn, otherwise we will never grow. I recently had to secretly ask a friend to define the word carceral to me. I’m not ashamed that I didn’t know what it meant, I’m ashamed that we’ve constructed a movement that led me to feel embarrassed for not knowing a word.

In practicing liberation we have to also be vigilant to not judge our survival strategies. We are creating but have not created this new world. I refuse to shame people who call emergency services for support. The goal isn’t shame, the goal shouldn’t be judgement. When we use shame as our strategy we are just using rhetoric to mask our failures, and with harmful consequences. Why are we shaming people for not having access to alternatives? Build them!

We can't say less or no prisons without saying yes to more support for our communities. We can’t tell people what they should or shouldn’t do for their safety particularly, when we are still in the process of creating alternatives, especially with the degree of education and class privilege that runs through our movements. We should all be suspicious when people with difference access to resources, are shaming less privileged survivors.
Therefore I call on us to practice liberation and build the new support system for survivors. Build the new 911, build the movement ambulance, build something better, don’t shame people into further harm, abuse, and or isolation.

At this point I’ve directly organized around 30 murders of queer and trans people of color. Everytime I’ve worked on a murder I’ve offered the surviving chosen and blood family members community based strategies to address the violence. While some people were interested in these offers, every single family member that I worked with was also interested in prosecution. This was not about politicizing people, many of the family members that I was talking to had experienced police violence, criminalization, and/or the prison system. This was about the limited alternatives that we have built and the work that we must continue to do in tandem with holding the police accountable.

So as you see practicing liberation is about holding complexity. There were times where we would work with a survivor of violence and later we would find out that they were actively causing harm to someone else. Perhaps they were a hate violence survivor but they were then causing harm towards their partners or lovers. To create a world without police or prisons, we will have to break down the false binary between the good and bad people, the survivors versus the “perpetrators.” This false binary supports the illusion that prison’s make us safer by saying, “calm down everyone, we have put the ‘bad’ people away.” Yet the truth is that I know in my lifetime I’ve survived violence and I’ve harmed. And sometimes my experiences of survival have taught me exactly how to harm others. Therefore, practicing liberation is about practicing our ability to engage in a non-oppressive, non-abusive, form of communication and collaboration. It means that we will have to reduce and resist the toxic ways oppression has taught us to treat each other.

How many folks know this chant? Please chant with me.

“It is our duty to fight. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and respect each other.”

Let’s say this part again. “We must love each other and respect each other.”

And again...“We must love each other and respect each other.”

And finally, “We have nothing to lose but our chains.”

This brilliant and necessary chant based on a quote from Assata Shakur, lays out our commitments or duties as a community of people within a liberatory movement. Yet the problem is we always seem to rush through and ignore, “we must love each other and respect each other.” However, its one of the most crucial parts of this chant. I know this organizer, maybe you know them as well. They are brilliant, their analysis is sharp, and I want to unleash them against our worst targets. They are also cruel, rude, and unaccountable. Many of us work to ensure that we stay out of their way, quietly disagreeing, or disagreeing behind closed doors, but refusing to publicly challenge them. Most likely this person behaves this way in part because or their own experiences of
oppression. For some of us intimidation is a survival strategy. But this toxicity is a huge threat to our movements, I would like to say that my biggest organizing challenges were external targets. I’ve been waiting and prepared for this generation’s COINTELPRO. While there is plenty of state surveillance of our movements, for me the biggest, most devastating, organization ending challenges I’ve seen are how all the oppressions that we experience and carry cause us to treat each other.

For the most part I’ve told yall all the amazing S.O.S. Collective stories but there were some really hard moments during my time. There this day where I was working with a brand new intern. I was really excited and had been talking about how amazing the members were and how I couldn’t wait for her to meet them. We had done some pretty intense organizing and things had been going well and we’d had a history of 15 – 20 person weekly meetings. Then we went through a series of interpersonal conflicts, that we didn’t recover from for quite a while. We’d made some hard decisions that some members had crossed agreements and boundaries. And these decisions divided the membership and the larger community of S.O.S allies and general members. So here I am hyping up the collective to this new intern, ready to show her how incredible we were, and 15 minutes before the meeting no one has come to help set up. I shake it off, because the meeting hasn’t actually started yet, expecting folks to walk in at 7pm, watching the clock slightly concerned. At 7pm, still no members, 7:15 no one, 7:30 and I was heart broken, trying to explain to this new person that the collective actually exists. No one showed up to the meeting, no one at all.

So what you all should know about me is that for the past 15 years I have had one primary partner, the movement. She is demanding, exciting, and all consuming. I would probably give her everything. My self esteem, my sense of who I am, all my rises and falls were deeply intertwined with S.O.S. Without the collective, I had no idea who I was.

There are times when dedication goes horribly wrong.

I fell into a deep depression during that time. Our meetings were small and the people who I considered family, were angry with me. And I was hopelessly lost. Practicing liberation is about digging into the shame, fear, and disassociation and finding ways to collectively heal while collectively strategizing to build safer communities. If I were to do it again I would have worked to create a wealth of resources and strategies to support people through their healing while organizing simultaneously. Maybe then we would have more tools for conflict, maybe some conflicts wouldn’t have occurred, maybe I wouldn’t have lost myself so deeply. As organizers and movement builders we hold space, dreams, trauma, and we pretend we don’t need support. But we have to take care of ourselves. I have firsthand experience of what it means when stress starts to impact health. I pretended that I never needed support, I thought that I was fine, until the panic attacks, ulcers, asthma attacks, came. For the world we’re building we’re going to have to hold ourselves to ambitious standards, and sustain ourselves for the long haul. These two goals do not need to be contradictory.
When we fully practice and embrace liberatory goals, it shifts how we lead. I was trained to organize in a very particular and deliberate member led way. We weren’t allowed to have perspective, voice, and to take up space. I was trained to be a vessel for the movement. It was a great way for me to learn to support the leadership of others and understand boundaries, power, and privilege, but it wasn’t great in terms of giving credit or feeling valued. When we layer this experience on top of multiple experiences of survival and oppression it can be very damaging to our individual and collective senses of self esteem.

As a response to this style of movement building I’m concerned about the choices that organizers and social justice leaders make when they begin to chase celebrity. Chasing celebrity and receiving appropriate credit is very different. I’ve been watching the market for progressive celebrity and how social media has placed celebrity within reach of more organizers. Clearly social media has gifted us with an array of amazing tools to deepen impact and create new ways of having conversation and collaboration. Yet, I’m also watching how people are building their own personal platform to speak for movements, to silence other people, to dicate strategy without collective input. People are thinking about the article they’re publishing, the next speaking gig their attempting to get, and how to maintain their brand identity.

The problem is the work of creating and maintaining a brand often the opposite of organizing. Brands aren’t malleable, or nuanced, it's really hard to compromise with a brand, it's really hard to find a mutual ground. And nuance doesn’t fit into a tweet very well. Through these celebrity battles we are sometimes overly identifying with our brands, over-identifying with our ideologies, fighting for them as they were our spirits themselves, throwing down gauntlets unnecessarily, and fighting against our potential allies.

It’s not shocking or surprising that there are people who want to get famous through the movement. We are socialized to think of movements as leader + speech + people = change. And most movement depictions in popular culture highlight the need for these leaders and celebrities. If these movies were accurate there’d be so many more meetings, right? I’m also deeply heartened by the black lives matter organizers repeatedly talking about the need for many leaders. It’s so very true. Practicing celebrity can really contradict leadership development – which is critically needed for our movements to sustain themselves. Part of the key to push against this need for celebrity is to say two phrases more: thank you and I see you. In fact conference organizers please stand or raise your hands.

Do you all mind telling them with me?
Thank you, I see you.

In the end practicing liberation is about embodying a bold pragmatism. It’s about embracing humility while claiming our value and dignity, and ensuring that we stay accountable to our communities during the process. It’s understanding that all of us can cause harm and oppress others. It’s about knowing when to lead, and when to support,
and that leadership can be supporting others. It about a rigorous push for answers and knowing that we may not have them and showing up anyway. We can all practice liberation in saying thank you, giving loving critique, in making space for everyone’s leadership, and ensuring that everyone feels valued. So I ask you to consider practicing liberation in the I don’t knows and we’re still learnings, in the courage to be vulnerable and the strength to be honest, in the I hear you but; in being fierce and kind, strong but loving, dedicated and playful, and in finding time for rigor and rest.

I’ll leave you with one of my favorite poems “Legacy” by Pat Parker as some inspiriation to keep practicing liberation.

“I give you a legacy of doers, of people who take risks, to chisel the crack wider. Take strength that you may wage a long battle. Take the pride that you can never stand small. Take the rage that you can never settle for less.”

Thank you.