



## The Makings of You: Racial Justice in Praxis Conference, Chicago, 2017

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**Keywords:** Racial Justice, decolonization, power systems

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Royster has worked for the last 20 years integrating art therapy into the educational setting and has worked with youth, adolescents, and young adults with various learning differences such as autism, traumatic brain disorders, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Using a trans-disciplinary approach, she is interested in community and school-based art therapy; race, power and policy in education; multi-sensory methods in reading and literacy; trauma-informed classrooms; environmental justice; black disability; and special education as it relates to decolonization of pedagogy and practice in institutional and public settings.

Royster's dissertation developed as a grassroots approach to arts-based social change and addresses gun violence, death, and grief through memorials of resistance. She assisted in creating transformative art-based social justice curriculum for Cities of Peace/Jane Addams Hull House, the Teacher Institute/ Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Office of Arts and Education at CPS and has conducted workshop series for Chicago Park District teaching artists. She has also worked with sexual, domestic violence, and human trafficking survivors and Cambodian youth refugees.

In 2017, Royster completed a Ph.D. in community psychology at National Louis University in Chicago and also holds master's degrees in special education (2000) from Virginia State University and art therapy (2002) from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago as well as a B.F.A. in studio arts (1998) from Virginia State University. Royster serves on the steering committee of Psychologists for Social Responsibility and is a board director for the American Art Therapy Association.

**Recommended Citation:** Royster, R. (2022). The Makings of You: Racial Justice in Praxis Conference, Chicago, 2017. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 13(1), 1 - 5. Retrieved Day/Month/Year, from (<http://www.gjcpp.org/>).

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### **The Makings of You: Racial Justice in Praxis Conference, Chicago, 2017**

The Racial Justice in Praxis Conference 2017 was an intentional journey to create an academic conference accessible to all including academics, activists, and community members. By breaking down power structures, centering creative resistance, and honoring the voices of the community the conference became a transformative space for growth, connection, and radical joy. The conference was an eclectic gumbo that included research, dialogue, art, music, and culture. This is a written reflection of the process of planning that conference, centering the voice of community, and liberating institutional academic spaces.

*Add a little sugar, honeysuckle  
And a great big expression of happiness*

It was a cold snowy day in Chicago. As I made my way to the university, large fluffy white snowflakes swirled around my head. It was the kind of snow that makes you want to tilt your head back and stick out your tongue to catch a snowflake or two and delight in it melting on your tongue. That wintery weekend, a group of people came together to build. I cannot speak for others in the group but my sole purpose was to “do conferences” differently. I had attended conferences in the past and never felt that I belonged as a young black community centered art therapist and teacher. At times, I felt like a voyeur, staring into other black and brown communities and being schooled on ‘*the flaw, the cure, and the savior*’ by my fellow white academics. My communities were always the ones that were being fixed. When given the opportunity to co-chair this conference, I asked myself, how do we gather as indigenous, black, people of color as conscious practitioners and researchers to share knowledge and still break down the barriers of colonization in academia? How could we gather differently within institutions and find solace amongst the storm? How can we reclaim our voices, space and home?

*The righteous way to go  
Little one would know*

As with any conference, there was struggle. It was a shifting of power and control dynamics within the group. The elders were releasing the reins and looking to the new blood to lead. As with any change or power struggle, conflict will manifest. Dissension if handled appropriately can push a group or organization forward. How do you respect what has happened before and still create something new and different? How can we center black and brown liberatory research and expression within historically white dominated spaces?

*The joy of children laughing around you  
These are the makings of you*

And then there were the children. As a mother of 3, it was natural to involve and bring the children. We created a space where children were welcome. I had never been to a conference that allowed this type of participation. It challenged the space and institution. The university has a safety policy in place that prohibits children from campus, ironically put in place as a way to protect children from inappropriate supervision. The policy was restrictive and refused to stretch its definition to consider “the village” during general public events. The village encompasses parents and guardians’ ability to responsibly accompany and provide supervision to minors in their care. Its overgeneralization and exclusion was the epitome of white male hierarchy. Getting

special permission we challenged the policy and brought the children and offered childcare to participants. The children brought radical joy, music, laughter and play. Currently, across college campuses, this policy is being challenged and redefined to be more inclusive to children in communal university spaces.

*I've tried to recite  
They're close but not quite  
Almost impossible to do  
Reciting the makings of you*

The conference started and ended with a symbolic ritual of music, drumming and dance. Paying homage to our indigenous ancestors it seemed natural to mark the occasion with this type of ceremony. Within the participatory music and dance performances and workshops, we celebrated and centered black and brown creative resistance. From the dance fight of capoeira, a Brazilian martial art that combines elements of dance, acrobatics, and music practiced by enslaved Africans in Brazil at the beginning of the 16th century as a way to disguise defense training. To the sounds of revolution from the Chicano band from East Los Angeles, Las Cafeteras. A band that uses spoken word and folk music, with traditional Son jarocho, Afro-Mexican music and zapateado dancing to create songs that inspire positive change with themes and references that range from the Civil Rights Movement, United Farm Workers, DREAM Act, immigration reform to female homicides in Ciudad Juárez. Ending the conference with the healing drum workshop led by the band Funkadesi. An eclectic mix of musicians that blends Indian music (bhangra, bollywood, folk) with reggae, funk, and Afro-Caribbean grooves.

We were intentional about including creative art expression and held space for spoken art, performance art, and quilting by conference participants and local artists. This creative art

expression has always been essential to our ability to connect, survive and thrive as black and brown people. It was important that this was central to the conference. An art show was included within the conference space, a focal point that displayed artwork that addressed social justice issues. Artist and activist Rachel Wallis brought her project, *Gone But Not Forgotten*, a collaborative quilting project creating a memorial quilt for individuals killed by the Chicago Police Department invited conference participants to engage in a sewing circle encouraging participants to engage in radical empathy, remembering that victims of police killings. Community art action and radical play was the core and foundation of the conference.

*These are the makings of you  
It is true, the makings of you*

The gathering at the beginning of the conference left a profound impression on me. We intentionally started the beginning of the conference by giving everyone space to introduce themselves by name and home. Giving participants a moment to orient themselves in space and time. We all sat knee to knee, toe to toe and defined and brought our safe, controllable, secure ideas of home to the conference. By just bringing our ideas of home to the space we started to dismantle the institutional space with memories of our food, our spices, our songs, our people. It was a framing of space and time and culture that is not often appreciated in a conference space. Each person brought themselves to that space along with their ancestors and broader concepts of home. It was a beautiful space that was given permission to happen. We took time to pay allegiance to ourselves, our homes and the baggage we tote.

I've used the song, *The Makings of You* by Curtis Mayfield to frame my writing about this conference. This song is part of a larger album that speaks of justice, love, and

community within the restraints of capitalism and white domination. It accompanied the movie, *Claudine*. A movie about a young black woman and mother trapped in multiple systems of social welfare and control. Ultimately, choosing love over capitalism. Revolution over subservience. This conference laid down a similar path of mutual aid. In the event that our institutions fail us and do not meet our needs, then we must - as a people - meet our own- through community and collective doing. That is where true liberation begins- in the small, which will eventually reflect the larger greater experience.

*They're close but not quite  
Almost impossible to do*

And in fact the conference was like building a canoe. At the end of the conference the canoe had been successfully constructed using a blueprint collaboratively designed by the collective with much give and take, trial and tribulations. Out of the labor of this conference many existential questions were birthed. How do we forge ahead as a group and conference? Who will sail the canoe? Where is the destination? And will it find home?