

Igniting the Kindred

A National Council Convenes to Work on the SONG Organizing School



First, Our Gratitude. To the group of busy, talented, and devoted people who spent the weekend forging this work (see their bios at the end of this document); to SONG member Manju Rajendran, and SONG volunteers Rishi Awatramani and Beth Teper for sustaining us with Fish Curry, Sweet Potato Soup and so much more; to SONG member Roberto Tijerina for his love and support; and to the Southern Spirits of the Highlander Center.

To all of you: moving forward, together. We could not have done it without you.

At the heart of this document is something that is hard to put into words. It has to do with a longing, a reaching, and a knowing of how to build a movement differently. It has to do with building and honoring what has come before, and stepping into a new way of envisioning our movement work in this country.

When we convened this meeting, the SONG facilitation team hoped to learn best practices from this council that could be put in a Southern frame and moved with. What we discovered, all of us together, was that we were in agreement that we are in a new place in movement history, that must be engaged with through both best practices that have come before, and new energy, strategy, and actions.

The school must address this reality. We emerged from the meeting with a new understanding of the direction. In essence, we seek to build an Organizing School to meet the moment a vessel to grow, share and build transformative and liberatory power. In reality, as Cara Page said: "This school has already begun."

For Vision and Heart and Naming the Pieces of this Story...

"...poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives."
-Audre Lorde

"Name to the Nameless": The conditions and the moment

"The culture of LGBTQ folks in the South is one of isolation... family/community isn't big enough...the sense is of needs not met." Trishala Deb

The council wanted it to be clear that we recognized this Organizing School will focus on people in and outside of 501c3 structures, and will train folks to be able to work in or outside of these structures. The South is perfect for this because we have less non-profit infrastructure than the rest of the country, and plenty of elders who remember doing work before the 501c3 system. We felt it was important to acknowledge the moment in the South which the Southern report spoke of, and also to speak of the current context of the US movement in general. The national conditions we identified are: dying and suffering non-profits, minimal leadership transitions, abusive inter-generational relationships, and movement people feeling numb, tired, and disassociated from their bodies and the land they are living with. We also spoke of scores of movement warriors seeking different ways to live their lives and do this work. The council asked about how SONG saw itself, and why it felt it was in a good position to build a container for the Organizing School. SONG facilitation team members said that we did not feel that we are the best organizers or trainers we know, but that we know how to listen to folks' longing and desire, and bring folks together to create a space, and that is exactly what we think an Organizing School needs to do. The council also felt that it was important to recognize SONG's process of the last year as more than a series of think tanks but as a full-on **listening campaign**, alike to listening campaigns conducted in movements around the world. This was very helpful to us, because it was a reminder for the core SONG team of how **listening to the people is not preparation for the work, it is the work.**

Because of the above and many other reasons, the council dreamed an Organizing School that could: replenish the movement with organizers, healers, and cultural workers; heal trauma; build lasting relationships; restore memory; build analysis and ability to think critically; build healthy accountability structures; teach folks to self-govern; build critical vision; support health and wellness; and create new protocols to meet the moment.

"Poetry is not a Luxury": The center of gravity for the Organizing School

"Values are more than a skill set--we shouldn't shy away from calling them what they are: where our work comes from."- Malachi Larrabee-Garza

Among the council, there was a strong feeling that the school must have a powerful touchstone in all that it did. It was agreed that we are in time where movement communities shy away from calling core elements by their true names: spirit, culture, tradition, legend. What is at the core of our work must resonate out, be transparent, and be fully articulated. This center must be more than rhetoric. It must be a container for strong values. We must value and hold dear **vision, wholeness, and being real to**

our roots. In our vision we always hold a pro-active space (third space) where people can dream; we listen to, and start from, people's stories; and we always embrace fire, fluidity, and curiosity. In our wholeness we honor people as they find and remember what is core to them; we work for continuously growing inclusion; and we create a space that can heal and transform our relationships while building a sense of connection and holding our longings. Finally, in our being real we are true to the flavor and traditions of the South, of LGBTQ folk, of people of color, of immigrants, of poor people, we hold tight to these precious ways that have been passed down to us. In the South, we have known for a long time, that these values, this culture, these foods, these protocols have kept us together as a movement family. We need to remember what we know already and continue to translate these core values into new and remembered tools and ways of interacting.

"Hopes and Dreams toward survival and change": Tools and Skills

"I hope the school will cultivate all kinds of leaders...and not think of healers, organizers, and cultural workers as separate. The idea is that we are building community and relationships."
Cara Page

The council felt strongly that out of the center of gravity flows a certain set of skills and tools. The skills that we want to be shared at the Organizing School relate to the skills that the council feels the people are speaking of, speaking to, and asking for. Eddy Morales sums up the goal behind these skills when he says: **"We need to be teaching the qualities of being analytical, relational, innovative, and reflective."**

The council suggested curriculum in these main arenas: **analysis, space creation, and land/body/memory work.** In general, the council felt strongly that a deep **analysis** is more than political education or information: it is **"a lens that people develop in order to reflect deeply on everything they encounter and are part of, including themselves (Amara Perez)."** Therefore, the school needs to start with analysis based on values, giving the students plenty of time to use and strengthen their lens by looking at their world and community in groups, and reflecting analytically on what they see. This area of the curriculum also needs to include concrete tools like: community mapping, histories of resistance, values development, and broad subjects of political education about what is happening outside the US as well as within its borders. Within all of this, we were clear that we want to see a returning to a form of popular education that is fun, but is more than just fun and catchy exercise, but that really starts from people's stories and builds from their experience.

Space Creation represents those aspects of the curriculum that deals with how to create a **third space.** For folks not familiar with this term, it first came to SONG through Najma Nazyat, and it names the first space as the capitalistic space of interaction and commerce, the second space as the re-active space (a space of pushing back against legislation and violence that hurt us, for example), and the third space as being the space of creation, vision, invention, birth. This space is

designed by the people themselves, and always in creation. From this notion of space, the council was led into many juicy conversations about how to create third space in the movement, and through the school. These spaces will hold strong protocols and practices for interaction, like honoring each other and spirit at each gathering, always holding space for children, putting up altars to our legacies, etc. It will also work to always build in concrete ways to show gratitude, enact contemplation and reflection, and practice healing. It will push us to use our bodies through role plays, interactive reflection, etc. as a practice of returning to ourselves and our bodies. This component will also push us all to look at how we can re-invigorate public space by transforming it into third space.

Land/body/memory work is that work that speaks to the importance of working to be whole and integrated with all around us, in order to move forward in the work. Curriculum in this area will focus on story-sharing, learning about the land we are on, stimulating the heart-mind-body as one, as well as things as concrete as time management, and learning about how to interrupt and intervene in violence. This is the component that supports the sustainability of the students, the school, the movement. It creates a place where students and trainers can absorb and integrate what they are learning and figure out together what they need to know how to do to go forward in the work. This component will boost the resiliencies the students already have: helping them to go deeper with these tools.

The council realized that many of these ideas moved the school away from some aspects of "classic organizing training", where often students are taught action skills that are put on the ground immediately. We intentionally suggested something different because we felt that this kind of curriculum and container would better meet the actual concrete conditions of the moment for example, countering the phenomenon of inadequate time given for reflection by allowing the students to work on their analysis, and then reflect *for themselves* on what kind of skills training they want and need to move their organizing dreams forward.

Such a plan suggests that, in fact, not everyone at the Organizing School is being trained to be a classic organizer because not everyone is good at that. Movement people play many other roles too especially as cultural workers, healers, artists, story-keepers, and fire-keepers.

**"Into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action":
The structure of the school**

"The stories are not being told and that is huge. Because stories become legends, and reality, and the container. So that's one thing. Also, after five years, people need to feel like they have been part of more than a program. They need to feel like they are part of a story." Najma Nazyat

Now is the time of the hybrid. We cannot do the work ahead of us without merging older practices and structures with newer ones. We must take risks in our movement work, without forgetting where we come from. Our structure must show this hybridity, this

fusion. It must also be co-designed with the students themselves, so that after five years people will feel that we built something together. The council wanted SONG to focus on deepening relationships we already have, and building local host teams for the school in different places. These host committees will be core to helping to identify students, local trainers, and bases to turn out for large community events, and a culminating event at the end of a session. They will also help SONG to deeply prep each community before the school starts in that place. This will help SONG to not hit the ground running, but to already be on the ground and in the ground as these local teams will be part of SONG before the school starts.

We want the school to start with a strong intake process where we identify who is coming in and their strengths, and help them to have a voice in the process of the school. The beginning of the school will be all about building the core: creating the space of the school; story-sharing and identifying story-keepers (documenters, artists, etc. who will hold stories of best practice in communities); strong analysis-building; group strengthening; and building skills around cultural work and collective healing practice. A lot of this will be slow, focused work that will be driven by asking good questions. From this place, the school will move collectively into helping the students begin to think for themselves about what work they want to do in their community, how they want to use their analysis to approach the work, and what skills they need to do this work. We will talk about different models, tools, and approaches to do that work. The group will also be creating new movement language: protocol and rituals that work for them. It will continue to involve both outside trainers and local people. We will be doing some co-mentorship work in "fire-keeper pairs" so that students can reflect and exchange with each other about where they are at.

Finally, when the group asks for certain skill-sets the training team needs to either share them, or if they don't have them, find the people that do and help the group gain access to these skills. It is important during this time for SONG folks from outside to not be holding on too tightly to outcomes, but to let the goals come from the group. During the time where the school is taking place there will be at least 1-2 events that are connected to the school that are open to the whole community. This gives more than a small group a chance to engage about the process. One member of the council summed up the whole process as:
Building, sustaining, sharing, transferring.

"Forming the Quality": SONG's place in the process

"We need to re-evaluate how we think about where we get skills and organizational loyalty: if you train someone to build a house, they don't have to be loyal to Lowe's or Home Depot. It's not just about SONG, it's about a movement." Mandy Carter

We talked for some time about the state of our movement in relation to organizations. Mandy reflects the thinking of many of us with her concise words above. The council felt certain

that we did not want to see SONG just use the school to build an organizational empire, where all the students roads led back to SONG. Instead, we wanted to see SONG be a space-creator, a convener, and a name that could come to be synonymous with the kind of organizing it helped create. SONG has neither the capacity nor desire to hold the Organizing School alone. We see that it is crucial to be doing this work with others to make it happen, in partnership. We especially flagged the need to collaborate with groups who do a lot of collective healing work, cultural work, and sustainable economies work.

"Carved from the Rock experiences of our daily lives": Culture, Healing, and Spirit in Our Work

"Spiritual practice is about how we gain our own power without having power over others...and how we keep going when nothing else gets us through." Trishala Deb

"We need to help queer folks re-connect to spiritual practice and turn that into movement practice. Because so many of us traveled this far, because we needed to be in this space...once we're here, we know we need it to survive." Evelyn Lynn

Cultural work, healing work and spiritual work are often treated with some wariness in movement circles. With good reason, as we are a country in the middle of a new age movement that tells us we can meditate out of poverty and buy our way out of pain. However, the members of the council spoke with great heart about how essential this work is to supporting whole activists, good organizing, and long-term movement-building. We know that we do not always know how to do this work, but, as Trishala says above, it is what gets us through in some form or another. As Evelyn points out, it is also not a luxury, but something essential especially for LGBTQ folks who have so often lost their relationship to spirit because they have been rejected by their blood families' traditions. For many of us, whether or not we say it, movement space is our spiritual space where our culture is, where our healing is, where all that is sacred to us sits. Because of this, and so many other reasons, we must not shy away from bringing these aspects into the very core of the work of the school. In fact, many of the council thought this work is so core, that Cara suggested we call the school "The Southern School For Organizing and Culture"!

"Farthest Horizons": What's next?

"Being an organizer and a cultural worker needs to be our vocation, our life work not just our job or something we volunteer for." Mandy Carter

It is our life's work, Mandy! And we live for the days when new organizers begin to see it as their lives too. We hope you are as excited about what is in this report as SONG's staff is. Our next step is to use some of the amazing maps, drawings, and lesson plans that were not included in this report to lay the plan for the first Organizing School that starts at the end of this year!

Keep up with our website for updates at:

www.southernersonnewground.org

Some more information on the members of this council:

Amara H. Pérez, community organizer, based in Portland, OR is founder and former Executive Director of Sisters In Action For Power: dedicated to developing leaders, analysis and organizing skills of young women and girls. Currently Co-Founder and Co-Chair of Happy Ours a volunteer-led community group dedicated to building pride, visibility, leadership and action among and for lesbian women of color.

Cara Page is a Queer Artist and Activist of Color working for individual and communal transformation; practicing traditions of healing and cultural work in Atlanta, GA. Founder of Deeper Waters and member of the Healer and Artists Response Collaborative (HARC).

Eddy Morales is Deputy Director of Leadership Development for Center for Community Change(www.communitychange.org), former president of the US Student Association, and is active on the boards of several leadership development organizations including Choice USA, US Student Association, National Jobs with Justice, and the Generational Alliance an alliance of youth and leadership development organizations. He has experience in training, issue campaigns, and electoral campaigns.

Malachi Larrabee-Garza holds central the hope for our collective future that comes from generations of transcendence. Malachi is on staff at SOUL (www.schoolofunityandliberation.org) focused on Advanced Political Education/Analysis Development with oppressed and exploited peoples; and also does core work on the board of, and working with, TGIJP (the Transgender and Intersex Justice Project) which works with, and to improve the lives of, trans folks dealing with the Prison Industrial Complex, including trans folks currently incarcerated. Revolutionary transformation is possible.

Mandy Carter is a co-founder of SONG and a co-founder of National Black Justice Coalition (www.nbjcoalition.org), where she is still an emeritus board member.

Najma Nazy'at is a practitioner who works with, for, and by youth: young people, young peoples movements, and young peoples cultures and young peoples part in our world...Boston is where I am from and I work at Boston-area Youth Organizing Project (www.byop.org).

Trishala Deb works with the Audre Lorde Project (www.alp.org), a community organizing center of LGBTSTGNC people of color. She is also a member of Community Birthing Project, a collective of women of color who are doulas.