Floetic Fridays Presents: Building Sustaining Collective Cultural Leadership

**Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth,
and Education Studies Major at Clark University**

Naomi R. Weintraub

Committee Signatures:

_____

Jie Park

_____

Eric DeMeulenaere

_____

Jacob Folsom-Fraster

Table of Contents:

Introduction

It was the last Floetic Friday's event of the academic school year, and we were running late, as we usually do. Everyone was in the atrium right outside the Fireside Lounge in the Bethune Multicultural Center at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. The audience was dwindling down, and the last performer was about to take the stage. I looked around at the room, from my usual sitting spot in the corner behind the giant speakers, where I would nervously re-adjust the volume knobs and hop to the microphone whenever there was a lag in energy.

All the Floetic Fridays organizers were in their usual places. Aryana was sitting in the front row, laughing and getting up now and then to introduce the next performer. Arielle was in the back of the room, walking around with a clipboard and greeting people as they entered. Sadie was in the audience, passing around pens and fabric squares for people to draw and write on to add to the community quilt art project. Lastly, I saw Jacob, who was always listening and appreciating from the back of the room, giving me the nod when the volume was at just the right level. It reminded me that this event, this organization, is so much more than just a space for one person to express themselves on the microphone, or for one person to dance or sing their heart out. It is, rather, a collective effort for communal care.

It took the collective leadership of all five of us to organize the Floetic Fridays events, but it took the entire community to fill it with healing, vulnerability, learning and love. It reminds me that in this work; people matter. Those for whom we make space and those in our community *matter* because human relationships drive cultural organizing. The magic of Floetic Fridays is not possible without partnerships and collective leadership.

As I looked across at the four other Floetic Leaders, at that last event for the year, I couldn't help but think: What is the future for Floetic Fridays? Will we be able to build new forms of partnerships and collective cultural leadership once people graduate or move on from the project? Will Floetic leave along with our leadership? This was the beginning of my exploration and research into how we, as cultural organizers and student activists, sustain collective cultural leadership.

Ethnographic Background

Floetic Fridays is a cultural organization, meaning that our theory of change focuses on spotlighting art, culture, community building, and care in order to shift policy or structural elements of our institution and carve literal space for radical healing, collective autonomy and liberation. We believe that by building community-shared platforms and environments for creative expression we can inspire, speak, share, laugh, love, bond, care, learn, listen, in vulnerable and radical ways.


Floetic Fridays posters used to promote events, created by local or student artists.

What really is at the intersection of activism, culture, and art? For Floetic Fridays, it has manifested into student-powered bi-monthly open mics and art showcases that we held either in the Fireside Lounge of Clark University's Bethune Multicultural Center, or in other community-shared spaces in Worcester, Mass., such as Crystal Park or the Worcester Pop-Up. These events have featured a wide range of creative expression – for example, gospel choir singing, African-Diaspora dancing, saxophone-playing poets, and games facilitated by the Worcester youth-liberation collective, Scamp School. Floetic Fridays holds a lot of dreams and hopes to be a

platform for vulnerable self- expression. While there are usually a multitude of ways to experience the Floetic events, performance has historically been a part of that. Whether they take the form of an open-mic or showcase, there is an act of embodiment that occurs at Floetic events.

In her essay, "Poetry is my Politics: Linking Spoken Word and Social Activism" from the book, *Open Mic Night: Campus programs that Champion College Student Voice and Engagement*, Crystal Leigh Endsley (2017) writes about her experience as a spoken-word poet in college. Endsley writes, "The campus open mic night functions for student-artists as a space to reset and remind themselves and their audience of the ways in which we can work together, within, and against, to resist." (71) This idea of the open-mic as a space to reset, connect, and resist resonates leads Floetic Fridays commitment to a mission of art and activism.

In addition to performance, collective creative expression is a main element of Floetic performances. A case in point includes our ongoing community quilt project, through which we invite audience members to draw, write, or decorate on a small patch of fabric that is later added to the larger quilt. We have been collecting these patches since our first event in 2017, and we continue to add.
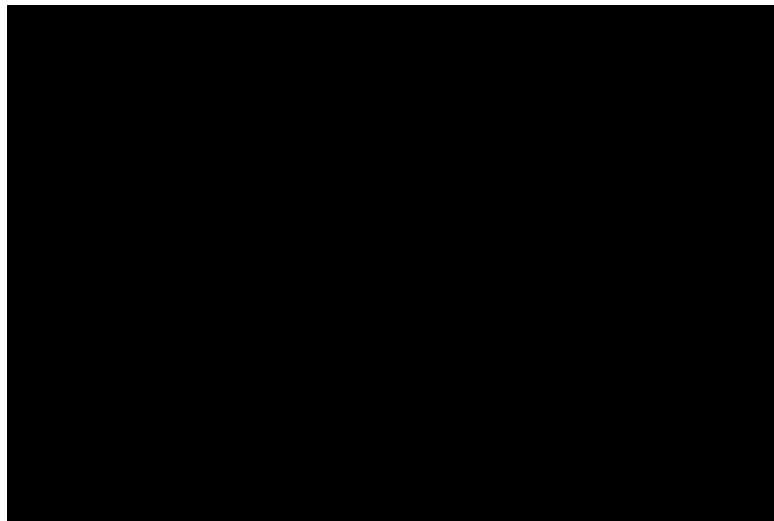
Segment of Community Quilt Art Project

While the community quilt depends upon communal engagement and participation, this project has largely been actualized and spearheaded by one Floetic leader, Sadie Levy. The community quilt project exemplifies the ways in which Floetic Fridays makes it possible to to uphold and support individual dreams and ideas for projects. It also represents that ways in

which we have struggled as a group to turn ideas into concrete acts. Sadie expressed that she often felt alone and unsupported by the group as she tried to maintain the momentum of the quilt project. It is conflicts like these that I hope to uncover more in my exploration of leadership throughout our growth over the past year.

Floetic Fridays was created in [year] by a group of Clark students in the context of our neoliberal institution that breeds a toxic culture of individualism which is deeply rooted in white supremacy, cis- heteronormativity, and capitalist exploitation. To quote our charter, "Floetic Fridays has a theory of change that cultural organizing and creative expression can serve as tools for healing, mobilizing, and empowering marginalized communities in the face of violence. As an organization, we are committed to finding ways to incorporate the narratives and voices of all marginalized communities through our organizing efforts." We created Floetic Fridays as a means to build leaders and community that can collectively challenge our current reality, by fighting for equity, and liberation for all.

In order to further embrace our commitment to justice, we begin all our events and even internal meetings by reading an acknowledgment of the indigenous peoples who once lived on the land we are now inhabiting. We adopted practice to root us in the history of colonization and violence that allows us to inhabit the land we stand and organize on today. It also reminds us that our liberation is bound in the liberation of all peoples and land.
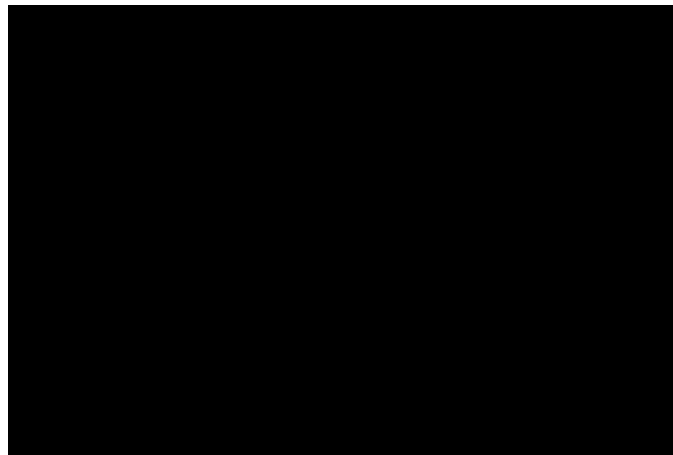
Floetic leaders reading the land acknowledgement at the start of our event, Floetic Fridays: Homecoming [September 2018].

While we believe in the working collectively, as organization we are fully driven by student power. In practice, this means that while we are grateful for our community partners –

that is, non-student supporters – the leadership of Floetic Fridays is grown from the Clark University student body. We try to utilize and redistribute student and university resources to put on events, whether we are hosting events on campus or not. Despite being student-run, Floetic Fridays value the connections and partnerships that have helped us from the Worcester community and beyond.

In its first two years, the same five original original organizers led Floetic Fridays. Among the five original organizers, whom I will refer to as the "Floetic founders", we learned many lessons about cultural organizing and the process of creating an organization. After three years, Floetic Fridays is now facing the next step in its growth, and we ask ourselves: how do we sustain collective cultural leadership in the organization?

The Problem

Floetic Fridays aims to build a long-term culture of activism and creative expression. It is held up by collective processes of creation and leadership, meaning no one person can continue this work on their own. It takes the development and support of not only new leadership but new cultural leaders, who are able and trusting enough to work collectively with love and care.

Bringing new leadership into any organization, let alone a non-hierarchical activist organization, is difficult. Leadership emerges through a need for action as well as through support and supportive processes. New leaders of the Floetic Fridays Collective (FOC) were brought in through word of mouth, personal connections, or their own individual pursuit of interest. All of the new members of the FOC are juniors or sophomores and joined the group with the interest in building community around creative expression and justice. In the past year, the Floetic founders who are still on campus or in Worcester have sought out new leaders in order to sustain the organization and build cultural leadership that can continue to grow and pass on power to future organizers. Cultural organizer and writer, adrienne maree brown (2017) echoes this sentiment in her book, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. brown writes, "Many of us have seen or lived through the emperor-has-no-squad moment when a great organization was ready for the first leadership transition and it became clear that all the greatness was largely perceived to come from the founder." (99) The leadership transition from the founders to those who will carry on the work that brown refers to is exactly where my project is situated.

We want to sustain our work without having to follow traditional notions of sustainability within higher education. In her piece, "Scaling up for Sustainability: Hip-Hop and Spoken Word as Vehicles for Translational Inclusion", Marla L. Jaksch explains sustainability within the context of higher education. "When we think about sustainability," Jaksch writes, "we think about something lasting, at a certain rate or level, and with the structures and frameworks to support it. In the context of higher education, the term also takes on additional meaning -- such as making something permanent, which includes the resources, especially financial, needed to build and maintain it. Within higher education we also describe this process as the institutionalization of a program, value, of tradition." (128)

I want to push back on the "institutionalization" process of sustainability within higher education and, instead, discuss an alternative. Within Floetic Fridays, the organizes are aiming to build a form of sustainability that is based in resilience and resistance, rather than concretizing our work for institutional benefit. We do not wish to make our organization sustainable so that we are more palatable for a culture which profits off white supremacy and capitalism. We are working to sustain our work because we want to persist and a grow as a people-led movement, instead of profit or exploit through institutionalizing or joining the non-profit industrial complex.

This process of sustaining our work brought up questions such as: How do we keep our organizations and cultures of justice sustaining without founding members? How do we develop individual cultural leaders while promoting a culture of collective process and creation?

My understanding of these questions is deeply informed by own positionality, experience as an artist and organizer and my learning from the work of activist scholars and cultural organizers.

Positionality and assumptions

In cultural organizing, people matter, and more specifically so does their positionality, and identity. As a community we ask our audience members to explore their personal history and journeys as a way to grow vulnerability and care. Unpacking my own identity and my history with community organizing has helped me understand the issues that face Floetic Fridays' leadership in many ways.

It reminds me of my time growing up at Jewish, socialist, hippie camp. Every year the junior counselors would plan what we called "Revolution." Junior counselors would take over

camp, and run a silly, fun, completely transformed world for 24 hours. As a young camper, I was completely transported. I experienced a reality that popped up out of thin air, and I saw nothing but the outcome. Years later, when I was a camp counselor, and it came time for me to plan and run my own Revolution, it took weeks of planning, and serious leadership skills to pull it off with my fellow junior counselor collective. The experience taught me that it took not only hard work and strategy to execute such magic and transformation, it also required group cooperation and a commitment to a shared vision of imagination and wonder. If the campers knew how much work it took to plan and execute this Revolution, would they want to do it themselves one day? It makes me think, if people know how hard social movement building and community organizing can be, would they want to put themselves in positions of leadership? What skills did we need as leaders to embrace our vision, dream among ourselves, and communicate that vision to others?

In high school, I found a similar community rooted in justice and collective leadership through our slam poetry team. With my team I learned the power of creative expression for making change and building trust in a community. Through writing and performing our poetry, we challenged each other to rethink our role as activist youth, and we challenged our notions of reality by sharing our stories. We used our voices, our stories, and our art to inspire others to fight for justice and foster community. I learned tangible skills about group facilitation, performance, teamwork, competition, popular education. By the time I graduated high school, I got *really* good at emceeing open-mics. It was through this learning experience I was able to see the impact that my identity had in terms of not only the power it had on others and my community, but the power it meant to me. I was no longer just trying to decipher my identity alone; I had an entire community of creative people who also wanted to learn about themselves through the stories of others. We would slam our stories together, as a team, and in those moments, clarity of our selves would emerge. In this context, when I say *together*, I am referring to writing poems, line by line as a team and performing them in groups on stage in front of judges and an audience of kids our age. We memorized the poems of our team members, and gave feedback one another. We cared about everyone's stories as though they were our own. The slam poetry team was a youth-led collaborative space built on care and love. We committed to using our art to resist systems of oppression.

During my first two years at Clark, I spent a lot of time thinking about my whiteness, organizing around dismantling white supremacy by facilitating popular education models to

promote anti-racism among white students. Our group was called "Student Community For Unlearning Racism (SCUR), and we worked under the notion that we need to be as mad about racism as we are scared of seeming racist. The group formed around the analysis that People of Color (POC) student organizers were holding a lot of the weight in educating the student-body about institutional racism occurring on campus, and we felt it was time for white students to do their own learning and anti-racist work without having to lean on the energy of POC students. This group set the foundation for me about what it meant to be working not only as a white organizer doing anti-racist work, but also as a student organizer in general.

I was able to gain insight into what it means to work in a collective decision making process, and we found ways to build partnerships with other student organizers. SCUR eventually lost steam, mostly due to a shift in needs on campus after President Trump was elected. Eventually many of the organizers from SCUR, along with POC student organizers, worked together to run a campaign to fight back against racist hiring practices in the International Development department at Clark. We also conducted an oral history project about anti-racism organizing at Clark over the past 10 years. This early student organizing work put me in contact with other students who eventually became Floetic founders with me. We concluded that we needed to shift the focus away from reactionary direct action, towards cultural organizing that focused on community care and art-based activism. We were seeking organizing that does not come from a culture of individualism but from strategic, planned, collective leadership and relationship building.

Navigating my own whiteness as a student organizer has been important to how I work in Floetic Fridays. As an organization that specifically aims to center the voices of POC, we examine how power can contribute to the kinds of roles and labor taken on by leaders. I worked to step back from the performative aspects of leading and do more behind-the-scenes work. However, I am not sure I was entirely reflective enough in the ways in which my whiteness dictated the roles I was excited to take on. While I did work behind the scenes with set-up, clean up, and sound-tech, I also co-emceed with Aryana for a few of the events. I began to intentionally stop emceeing the events to be sure POC audience members felt represented or comfortable on stage.

In Spring 2018, I was able to see how Floetic Fridays fits into a history of cultural organizing throughout the United States when I attended the Highlander Center for Research

and Education Retreat: "Students Leading the Change for Racial And Gender Justice: Identity, Agency, Transformative Leadership." My experience at Highlander exposed me to the long history of utilizing cultural experiences and creative expression in activist strategy and organizing. For example, I learned about the long-standing history of communal singing as a crucial tool in movement building. In his book, *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement* (2007), author Joe Street, contextualizes this history. Street writes:

> Highlander's official policy asserted that democracy meant more than simply freedom of thought and religion, and more than equal rights to a livelihood, education and health; it also meant an equal opportunity 'to participate in the cultural life of the community.' For Highlander's staff, the cultural programs, especially those involving group singing and collective improvisation, exemplified the spirit of the community that the school hoped to create. These activities helped to forge bonds between individuals in a group by breaking down personal barriers and opening up channels of communication… More than simply a means to create bonds of friendship, the democratic practice of communal singing was also a device for transmitting ideological and pedagogical messages. For the staff of Highlander, cultural programs had a dual purpose: they helped to develop group cohesion, and they highlighted how culture and politics existed in symbiosis. Thus the cultural work fed into and informed the political work, as a well as making a political point itself (20).

My experience at Highlander emphasized the importance that cultural work fed and informed our political work. At Highlander, I was able to learn more about the specific strategies and tools used throughout history to develop cultural organizing. I was beginning to see Floetic Fridays through a lens of larger social movements and activism.

In terms of my role in the current internal leadership development for the new organizers, the Floetic Organizing Collective (FOC), I have to be particularly careful how much I impact the decisions and opinions of the new organizers because I hold power and expertise as one of the creators. As a founding member of Floetic Fridays, I have always considered myself to be fairly dreamy. I can get lost in my ideas, and the wonderful amazing ideas that can be produced from collective sharing and thought. As a gender-queer, Jewish visual artist, I often work around

themes of justice, identity, play, and "constructing a new reality," so falling into this role came rather naturally. It took personal accountability for me to find an ease in working logistically and structurally with the organization. Floetic Fridays demands that we investigate identity not only for ourselves, but to better understand how we impact and can change our community.

As I said previously, this work is deeply informed by my positionality and also from building a conceptual framework by collecting the wisdom and teachings of contemporary activist scholars and cultural organizers. In order to fully understand the work and impact of Floetic Fridays, we have to break down the concepts that are often invisible or left unspoken about during the hustle and bustle of organizing. Through my praxis project I am aiming to unearth a better understanding of what actions and frameworks have led Floetic Fridays' growth, positive and negative. In order to pass down this knowledge to future leaders so that they might value the process of growth and discovery, we need a framework of concepts and theories to use in dialogue with our experiences and actions.

Conceptual Framework

I would like to begin by framing the work of Floetic Fridays as cultural organizing, which is working at the intersection of art and activism in order to shift structures and policies. As I explained previously, I was able to conceptualize the work of Floetic Fridays as cultural organizing through my experience at the Highlander Folk School. My own understanding of cultural organizing has been largely influenced by Highlander's definition:

> Cultural organizing places art and culture at the center of an organizing strategy to shift and move progressive policies and practices within marginalized communities. People and their communities have cultural practices that help them move forward, work together with others, build bridges, celebrate and inspire action.

Highlander's definition of cultural organizing is written in the context of a long history of civil rights activism and Appalachian organizing; however, it has led the way for many organizations' theory of change. This definition affirms that if we encourage communities to tap into their own culture, creative expression, and identities we can promote vulnerability and therefore trust. Not only are we fighting for a new world, we are choosing to fight in solidarity, putting our culture at the center.

So what field of study does this work really fit into? Is this socially-engaged art? Is this popular education? Is this community organizing, which uses art as a tool? In his essay, "What is Cultural Organizing?" (2015), Paul Kuttner explicates the three ways in which cultural organizing has emerged: the cultural strategy approach, the community arts approach, and the cultural integration approach. Kuttner emphasizes that throughout all of these approaches, there is a navigation between the public discourse of ideas, the creation of art, and building authentic spaces for people to actualize their full selves and dreams. He states, "This area of practice is more fully committed to cultural expression and artistic practice than most organizers, and more connected to traditional organizing than most political artists" (Kuttner, 2015). But what does this literally look like? It takes the form of community potlucks, movie screenings, dance parties, art shows, parades, concerts, group art builds for direct action, protests, religious ritual done communally or shared, and even individuals making posters, graphics or music that is for a community action or event. Echoing Kuttner, I want to make clear that none of these things are particularly art or activism but rather actions performed in attempt for connection. For example, in my own work as an undergraduate studying Studio Art and Community Education, I have learned to see my work as constantly interconnected and sitting at the intersection of social justice and the fine art world. At this intersection, we are not just activists or artists, we are choosing to employ our whole selves and express by any means necessary. We are not differentiating between the two, because being an activist and an artist is truly about dreaming, and imagining the world we want to live, the world we are fighting for. To quote Berchtol Brecht, we see art not only as a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it, (Milstein, 2007).

Cultural organizing aims to build trust among people. If we strengthen our relationships, we increase our capacity for change and resistance. As the opening vignette illustrates, we have come to understanding that when thinking about cultural organizing, we also need to think about cultural leadership -- the people who are behind this work. Without paying attention to leadership, our organizations won't be able to sustain in the long-term. On the inside, Floetic Fridays is made up of student organizers of varying marginalized identities who all believe that we should use our resources as students of Clark University to create a space where students can be heard and authentic forms of connection and growth are possible.

In her research, Endsley (2017) identifies the emerging student-artist cycle. Her experience and research echo the sentiment that Floetic Fridays emerged from, and the ways in which art was entwined in our work. Endsley writes,

> Artistry and activism aren't always considered partners or even parallels. College students are positioned as consumers or customers in the neoliberal system of education and those of us operating within such confines often struggle to put into service democratic and liberatory educational practices (Ladson- Billings, 1995; Porfilio & Yu, 2006; Richardson, 2002). What we might perceive of as hopeless and cyclical sociopolitical chaos is actually exactly the sort of environment that spoken word poetry was labored into face new challenges that have evolved in the last decade, and yet the cultural relevance of the open mic persists (69).

Endsley identifies the positioning of students as consumers and customers within the neoliberal system of education as a pressure cooker for the creation of liberatory, creative spaces. My work with Floetic Fridays affirms Endsley's notion; we are able to enact our visions because we believe it is crucial to the survival of our authentic selves and human-ness. This work is difficult, thus necessitating leaders who can pave the direction and actualize the needs and ideas of the community.

Within Floetic Fridays, we have developed *Cultural Leadership*. In Kuttner's article, "Building Community Cultural Leadership" (2013), he quotes Dr. Toby S. Jenkins' definition of cultural leadership,

> Cultural leadership is creative leadership. It utilizes the arts and various other assessable forms of creative public scholarship and open community spaces to educate and raise awareness. Cultural leaders are rooted in the community and committed to social justice. They are raw leaders with thick skin, unflinching determination, and a love for people that allows them to take the blows that may come even from the communities that they seek to help. They are social change agents and social servants. They understand that a leader is first a servant. This vision of cultural leadership can move us away from a celebration of celebrity, and towards a more grassroots strategy for cultural change. (2013)

Jenkins' definition of cultural leaders is useful, however, I want to complicate the assumption framing the cultural leader as an *individual* social servant. Cultural

organizing necessitates leadership that grows *networks* of human beings who are committed to using culture to make change in their community. There is nothing easy about resistance, organizing, or living against the grain, but we need to stand up for *ourselves*, in order for the paths of social change to exist at all.

While I wish that Jenkins' definition emphasized the collective power that leadership relies on, it does remind me that cultural organizing is not about bolstering the charismatic leader who stands alone, leading the way with one particularly brave act. Maree writes, "We [charismatic leaders] can make missions drift, can get embroiled in inter-organizational or inter-movement beef that doesn't serve the people, can get into a victim mentality and direct a lot of movement energy towards defending our egos, or get convinced of our superiority" (100).

It is important to analyze the ways in which the context of Western capitalism produces a culture of individualism implicit in Jenkins' conception of cultural leadership. Mark Fairfield works to combat this culture of self- sufficiency and isolation through his work with Relational Uprising, a training and coaching institute that aims to help build strong relational culture within social justice communities. Fairfield has been able to study the impact of individualism on relational culture in organizing spaces. During an interview with Kate Werning on Healing Justice Podcast, "Relational Culture & Undoing Individualism" (2018), Fairfield defined relational culture as, "a commitment to rescuing relationship from an insidious, poisonous, lethal, drift in our dominant culture, towards extreme individualism, which has been gaining momentum for hundreds of years." For Fairfield, it is impossible to confront relationship conflicts or interpersonal culture of a group without investigating the ways in which the community has been impacted by individualism. In this interview, Fairfield goes on to explain that when we look back at history, we can see that human life has been built from interconnected strength and support. Fairfield says, "we [as a society] are not trying to become independent. If you study biological systems there is no life form that does that, that doesn't exist. What you will see is a very diverse range of connections, so if there is a strain on one side of connections, there is all these other kinds of connections to compensate for that." Grounding our relational practice in the patterns and growth of our natural environments allows us to see conflict and difference as resources for new life and ideas.

In addition to the culture of individualism, we have entered 2019, in which capitalism is working (successfully) to glamorize organizing and protests, as an attempt to co-opt these

movements for aesthetic purposes. We are told #staywoke, but in reality this is just capitalist exploitation of social movements, and profits off of the appropriation of black culture, queerness, and sub-culture. It is cool to be different, but not as cool to get arrested for speaking out. Rather than bolstering punchy Women's March posters, we must embrace our social realities as a crucial sustaining factor of this work.

Building from what I have learned from my own identity, organizing experience, and my conceptual framework, I would define Floetic Fridays' leadership structure as Collective Cultural Leadership. This is a term I generated to define the ways in which Floetic Fridays leaders are not only cultural organizers, those who use arts and culture to promote social change, but to emphasize *how* we do this work.

Collective Cultural Leadership

By defining Floetic Leaders as Collective Cultural Leadership, we are choosing to explicitly demand that this work cannot be done without collaboration and relationships. I believe that using the term Collective Cultural Leadership is an attempt to demand that Cultural Leaders do not work in isolation but rather are inherently tied to the communities that they hope to serve, and to one another.

On the ground, how do we organize free-from-capitalist commitments to individualism, unsustainability and transactional relationships? Through my work, I have been able to identify three interconnected elements for Cultural Organizations attempting to sustain Collective Cultural Leadership:

1. Vision
2. Ownership
3. Transparency

Vision. So first off, what is vision? I have come to understand vision to be the individual and shared ideas that serve as our co-created dream for the future. Our vision is not linear; it is not our ultimate goals or destiny, but rather

ideas that serve to conceptually or concretely help us actualize our dreams. I believe that in cultural organizing work it is crucial to see our individual visions as a part of the collective shared vision. On a micro level, this can be as concrete as an idea for an event, or abstract ideas about feelings that people are interested in co-producing through their work. On a more macro level, this can look like choosing to partner with another organization that shares similar goals and merging your events or programs to serve an even larger population.

However, vision is not only about resonating with the ideologies of a group, but also creating group dynamics that have space for developing visions, and dreaming. brown writes, "the more people who cocreate the future, the more people whose concerns will be addressed from the foundational level in this world" (158). Making space to co-create collaboratively from the foundational level is vital to building collective cultural leadership.

Ownership. We can't co-create visions without ownership. Through my work and through reading about the culture of individualism, I have begun to understand ownership in social justice organizing as making space for meaningful risk-taking. We need to find ways for people to not only adopt the "work" but take risks and make decisions for and because of the organization. I intentionally chose the word ownership because it is regularly used by the FOC in their own descriptions of leadership experiences. Ownership as a concept holds capitalist notions of ownership as "personal property" or monogamous ideas of love. I am choosing to define ownership as the ways in which individual and groups of leaders come to make space and advocate for a project because they see it as a part of their own paths for liberation. This way of looking at ownership is demanding that we work from the belief that we have an abundance of love to build from and share. In his article, "BUT WE DON'T HAVE LEADERS: Leadership Development and Anti-Authoritarian Organizing" (2013), anarchist organizer and writer, Chris Crass writes,

> Leadership development is also about encouragement, recognizing that people frequently carry enormous insecurities about being good enough, having enough experience, having anything worthwhile to say and doubting that anyone thinks they're capable enough. Simply saying, "Hey you should go to the next organizing meeting" can be a form of leadership development. It's a reminder that the meeting is happening and indicates that you want that person's involvement (169).

At any point in someone's experience as a community organizer, we face insecurities or doubts that we are not the *right* person to be doing the *right* things. Crass brings up an important element of leadership development, that I see as a part of ownership. As a group we must include people intentionally through encouragement and in-person acknowledgment that someone believes in you. This is the first step to building partnerships where we can take risks and communicate effectively.

       Transparency. Meaningful risk-taking and working with models of abundance requires intentional and plentiful communication among leaders -- thus necessitating the need for transparency. Working collectively with cultural leaders requires a commitment to communicating boundaries, capacity, needs, feelings (good and bad), and affirmations. In addition, transparency among organizers helps dissolve structures of hierarchy and power, because there is a clear understanding of the place everyone is working from and working towards. I have seen firsthand from my experience as a student organizer that ongoing state violence and chaos breeds an unhealthy urgency in 21st century student organizers. I have seen time and time again groups of student organizers who are working from assumptions that they must be over capacity at all times or else nothing will ever change, or they "aren't doing enough". When we take time to communicate what needs to be accomplished, and compare it to the capacity of the organizers present, then we are able to make realistic, and meaningful goals for our work.

       For clarity, I chose to explain each of these elements on their own, however they are deeply intertwined and interconnected. None of these three elements can function without the commitment to the other. One example of this interconnection in action is, "collaborative ideation", a term and practice that was created by adrienne maree brown, and adopted as a practice and concept used by the Floetic Fridays Collective Cultural Leadership. maree writes,

> At the human scale, in order to create a world that works for more people, for more life, we have to collaborate on the process of dreaming and visioning and implementing that world. We have to recognize that a multitude of realities have, do, and will exist. Collaborative Ideation is a way to get to this - ideation is the process of birthing new ideas, and the practice of collaborative ideation is about sharing that process as early as possible (158).

In Floetic Fridays, we have used this in order to create a practice of sharing our ideas, dreams, and visions with the group of leaders, and we have made a practice of doing this in dialogue. This has allowed us to not only share visions, but gain accountability and ownership around these ideas, and also communicate them in terms of our capacity and needs. Adopting maree's practice of collaborative ideation is one of the many things that Floetic Fridays has done to build vision, ownership, and transparency among our leaders. Through my praxis project I have been able to spend more time analyzing and learning from the various interventions and practices that we adopted and enacted in order to sustain collective cultural leadership.

Praxis Project Goals and Research Questions

My praxis project is an attempt to understand how to sustain collective cultural leadership. This is a single case study of praxis (theorized action, intervention, and analysis/reflection) on cultural organizing on a college campus and the challenges of sustaining cultural leadership, but it should have implications for other for other cultural organizing spaces and particularly ones within institutions of higher education, especially predominantly white, neoliberal institutions that claim to value diversity and community engagement, but often do not live out their professed values in action. My primary research questions are as follows:

1. What interventions did the Floetic founders use to sustain collective cultural leadership among members of the Floetic Organizing Collective (FOC) ?
2. What were the impacts of these different interventions on the FOC?

Project Design

Methodology

By interviewing organizing leaders, facilitating meetings, writing field notes, analytic memos, and audio taping and transcribing key conversations, I utilized a collaborative approach to collecting information, history, and ideas around cultural leadership and sustainable relational practices. As an undergraduate major of the Community, Youth, Education Studies program at Clark University I build on a larger history of cultural organizing in the United States and the

importance of creating literature about how to sustain cultural leadership. While the Floetic Fridays organization has existed for about three years now, this analysis focuses on the work that took place over the last year to sustain collective leadership, starting in April 2018 and continuing into Spring 2019.

My research questions are relatively intuitive concepts to explore as an activist-researcher. Asking, 'What *are* we doing?' and, '*How* did it impact?' are important starting points for understanding the implications of this work on sustaining not only our own organization but also cultural organizing for all justice movements and student-based activism. As a member of Floetic Fridays myself, I was able to record and take notes during meetings, conduct one-on-one check-ins, and attend retreats. This allowed me to analyze a wide range of conversations and dialogues about what our organization needs, and internal conflicts.

Data Collection and Analysis

To explain my data collection and analysis chronologically, I began by having conversations with the Floetic founders. In April 2018, our group was preparing for the turnover of leadership because two of our founding members were graduating. This opened space for me to begin having recorded check-ins with the founders. These check-ins usually were fairly informal. I would sit down with either Jacob, Sadie, Arielle, or Aryana and ask them about how they were doing and what they have been thinking about lately. I would ask if I had permission to record, and we would talk freely, without any guiding questions that I planned ahead of time. This was an important start to getting people into the practice of talking about our work, but it was not a formal interview with predetermined goals. Around this time, I also began recording meetings between the founders and our new organizers, Wendy, Pauline, Jamie, Rachel, and Heather. These meetings were long, and the conversations were not guided by my research interests specifically but rather by the questions and inquiries of our new organizers. By the end of Spring 2018, there had been at least three meetings among the founders, the founders and some of the new organizers, and then lastly the founders that would be still on campus after May 2018 (Arielle, Sadie, Jacob, myself) and the new organizers.

Throughout the summer, I spent time working with Arielle on our organizational charter, but it wasn't until the end of the summer that we had a formal conversation about it. We had mostly been communicating through Facebook Messenger, and Google Docs to build the charter,

which looking back, was not the most productive way of working because of significant lag between our edits. During this time, I also read about other organizations doing similar work and read books by other cultural leaders, to build up my bibliography for this work.

Starting in August 2018, the new organizers began reaching out for support about how to plan the first Floetic event of the year, which was going to be their first project as new organizers. I had many phone calls and Messenger conversations giving advice or encouraging words, but these were not recorded or reflected on immediately after, because they required me to prioritize the organization's goals rather than my research itself. There were no in person meetings in the summer, but the new organizers had one video call at the end of the summer to discuss plans for their first event. I was not on this call because at the time Arielle and I thought it would be best for them to have a conversation without the founders included.

Once the school year began, we started having meetings as a group. These meetings would occur on a semi-frequent basis, we had about three meetings as a group in the Fall semester. I would use my tape recorder to record all of these meetings and took notes in my research journal, on repeating concerns that the organizers were working through. I spent a lot of the Fall 2018, brainstorming and strategizing on interventions with Arielle, putting them into action, and then reflecting afterwards. During this time period, Arielle was having private check-ins with the organizers that were not recorded, but she would relay the overall feelings of each of the organizers to me if I asked. One of our interventions was to conduct two retreats that occurred at the very end of the semester, these were both audio recorded and I took notes on crucial themes that were repeated among the organizers. In addition, I collected any posters or agendas that were used and took photographs.

At the start of the Spring 2019, I had my first recorded check-ins with the organizers. At the point, I was fairly far along in my research process, so many of the questions I asked the organizers were guided by my research thus far. These conversations were recorded, and I conducted them either in pairs, accompanied by Sadie, or just myself and the FOC member. The conversations were not particularly planned, and I did not have an agenda for how I would lead the conversation. I would tell the organizer that they could talk about whatever they were thinking about related to Floetic and if there was anything they specific they needed. All of the FOC members were extremely eager to talk, and the check-ins were usually at least an hour long or more. After this round of check-ins, I had follow up conversations with two of the organizers,

Wendy and Pauline. Because I had interviewed them first and there had been a lot of new structures and developments in the weeks that followed, it was important that we followed back up on how they were doing. During this time I would specifically take notes about repeating concepts that were used, and I would find ways in which the skills that the organizers were building fit into my frames for cultural collective leadership.

By mid-Spring 2019, I participated in the CYES Cohort 1 Data Analysis retreat. I was assisted in looking at my data, and making sense of them through my research questions. I identified three different interventions and used coding to map out their impact on the individual members of FOC. I mapped the impact based on whether the member of FOC resisted, ignored, accepted, or engaged/saw personal value in an intervention.

I originally filled out a chart based on my Spring 2019 check-in conversations with each member of FOC. From my conversations I made a lot of assumptions, which are reflected in this chart. For example, Wendy and Pauline focused on their challenges with enacting visions and did not specifically cite the charter as a helpful tool for enactment. This led me to believe that they were resisting the charter. However, after my second round of check-ins I was proven wrong. I found that they indeed found the charter helpful, but that they just didn't think it was something crucial to discuss. In addition, I assumed that all the of the organizers ignored the dialogue practices we introduced to them, because they did not bring it up as something that they found personal value in. But over time, I realized that this was just because they had not had the time or opportunity to put the dialogue methods into practice for themselves because they were still developing as a group. My misconceptions when filling out the chart helped me understand the ways in which all of the interventions are not only interconnected but dependent on time and experience. At the time of the data analysis retreat, filling out the chart helped me identify the interventions that I was interested in. While I did underestimate how Pauline and Wendy felt about the charter, it still clearly contrasts Jamie and Heather's reaction of engagement. Being so deeply involved in this organizing myself, it was hard not to place my own assumptions on to the organizers based on my personal experiences working with them, but when I went back and listened to the recordings of our one-on-ones again, I was able to see how my assumptions led my analysis of their reactions. Although my original assumptions were not ultimately the defining findings of my work, it did help me see the ways in which each organizer was different and how they chose to address leadership needs. Throughout the data analysis process, I

experienced a shift in my thinking. I began to focus more on the dimensions of the interventions and less on the ways in which FOC organizers embraced them.

When approaching my first research question -- "What interventions did the Floetic founders use to sustain collective cultural leadership among the Floetic Organizing Collective (FOC)?" -- it was particularly crucial for me to reflect with other Floetic founders, to dig deep and identify structures and concepts that we strategically introduced. I have went back to analyze and explore what led us to make the decisions about what to develop and implement. There was something that the Floetic founders and I intuitively knew that helped us develop these interventions. I believe this was partly the shared belief that human relationships matter, and that relational culture needs attention if we wish to build healthy sustaining leadership over time. However, it was not until my analysis of our interventions that I noticed we were aiming to specifically grow vision, ownership, and transparency among the FOC.

DATA CODING OF INTERVENTIONS IMPACT

ORGANIZER	DIALOGUE	RETREATS	CHARTER	CHECK-INS	NOT USING FB MESSENGER
WENDY					
PAULINE					
JAMIE					
RACHEL					
HEATHER					

ENGAGED/PERSONAL VALUE = ●
Accepted = ●
Resisted = ●
IGNORED = ●

As expected, many of the tools we introduced or ways we strategically intervened, did not have the impact we expected, which is why I asked my second research question -- "What are the impacts of these interventions on the FOC" -- became crucial to understanding not only what was working, but in what ways, for whom, and towards what goals. In order to measure the impact of these interventions, I analyzed whether they were effective in building vision, ownership, and transparency, which are the three elements for sustaining Collective Cultural Leadership that I outlined in my conceptual framework. In addition, having notes and transcripts from conversations and meetings among the FOC and from one-on-one check-ins, allowed for not only my own personal analysis of our process but also helped members of FOC reflect on their reactions to the interventions as well.

Findings

When approaching this section of my research, I have struggled to find ways to communicate effectively. Who am I writing this for: Future organizers of Floetic? My Professors? Other Artists? Other Community Organizers? Myself? Contemplating who is a part of the audience that I am communicating to has been an important part of my thinking around praxis, because it is necessitates an elaboration of my context. We need to share our findings, our failures and our approaches, so that others can learn from our work. Here is my humble attempt at dissecting and explaining the process that I conducted with the founders for Floetic Fridays new leadership to promote and sustain our collective cultural leadership.

To explore my first research question -- "What interventions have been used among the Floetic Organizing Collective (FOC) to sustain collective cultural leadership?"-- I examined specifically the strategic interventions, and choices that the Floetic founders made during the year from Spring 2018 to Spring 2019. These interventions were decided on with the understanding that no matter what, there is no way to control exactly what happens to the future of Floetic, and that these are just attempts to develop a process for sustaining the work through the development of new leadership. Working from our collective past experiences with organizing, working for non-profits, foundations, and schools, we knew that it was vital for us to not just replicate structures we saw used by other groups, but to completely reimagine what it meant to sustain. The founders had past knowledge from our work as organizers, artists, and educators that guided us in finding tools that would eventually be used in our interventions, but we still needed to do the hard work of reimagining these tools for our unique organization. The three main interventions we introduced are:

1. Floetic Fridays charter
2. Group retreats
3. Dialogue and Leaning into Conflict

In light of my praxis, I have found that all of our interventions incorporate structural and programmatic practices as well as cultural and social practices. I define structural and programmatic practices as- logistically planned and orchestrated events, and practices that address the structure of the organization. I define cultural and social practices as times spent building trust, storytelling, being, eating, in order to enact a specific feeling, vibe, or memory. While these two categories are extremely different, I want to emphasize that these are not

mutually exclusive categories. None of the interventions I have identified embody just structural or programmatic practices, or just cultural and social practices, but rather are a balance of the two.

In reference to my second research question, I will analyze their effectiveness in building vision, ownership, and transparency among the FOC. For clarity, I will explain the interventions individually, however, all of the interventions were extremely interconnected and at times we utilized combinations of the three.

Floetic Fridays charter

When looking back at the story of the Floetic Fridays charter, I think about Spring 2018. It was April, and we held a meeting with all the interested future FOC members. The meeting was full of uncertainty, much of it was spent trying to explain and communicate the roles and kinds of decisions need to be made in order to put on a Floetic Fridays event. We were discussing the value in creating a charter that would compile history and visions of the organization. One of the new interested organizers and now member of FOC, Jamie, said,

"I guess the way that I view or I kinda see a charter operating within Floetic is-- the people who started Floetic, and ya know, are kinda handing it off and like helping this transition, thinking about what they want Floetic to forever and indefinitely be on this campus... the way that you have introduced Floetic to us just verbally, needs to be put in the charter, saying this space is intended to be free and open, and all of that, for ya know us, but also just so that there is a clarity with people who come in and out".

This quote highlights that from the beginning of the leadership transition process, new organizers saw the charter as an important programmatic structure that would allow for us to effectively pass down history, ideas, visions and information about Floetic.

Following the request of the new organizers, Arielle, Sadie, Jacob, and I worked during the Summer of 2018 to write, edit, and format the charter. Throughout the creation of the charter, I will admit, I continually had to find ways to renew my confidence. As a young organizer, and co-founder, it felt very hard to talk about Floetic Fridays with conviction and sureness, mostly because so much of organizing is truly about experimentation and learning more from mistakes. We wrote the charter knowing that this work is inherently flawed, and as a more formal attempt to layout the things that we as Floetic founders have learned in our journey thus far. Despite

feeling this way, the charter ultimately is quite bold and aims to remind organizers that this work is urgent and necessary. However, I believe that our humility in writing the charter helped us be transparent that this work is difficult, and that in cultural organizing, ownership of something does not require a mastery of the skills.

Through analysis, I identified that the charter was almost entirely a structural practice, rather than a cultural or social practice. While it was full of ideas around how to *build* cultural and social practices, the document itself was a concrete, declaration and became an artifact rather than a ritual. This is important, because as a community organizing project, our sustainability relies on finding ways to document, archive, and pass down our knowledge and power. While we are not an institution, the notion of "institutional knowledge/memory" and formal archiving became a way for us to collect and pass down the things we had learned as student organizers. This knowledge, history, and skills we learned is a form of power, and sustaining Collective Cultural Leadership requires and insists spreading and reproducing this power. For new leadership to have ownership, they need to know the identity and history of what they are agreeing to lead, shape, and protect.
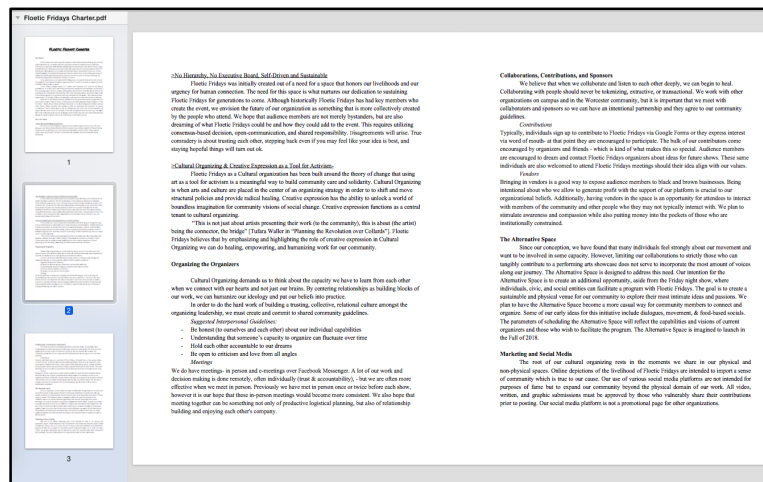
Screenshot of Floetic Fridays Charter

In addition, the charter was created to be a shared text that served as an entrance point for the work. Floetic Fridays holds so many different components and ideas, that having a shared text allowed us to have a container to hold our initial conversations, and helped focus on visioning processes. The charter became a tool for organizational transparency, communicating what it takes to run this organization logistically but also ideologically. I originally thought that

without this transparency of knowledge and information, and the container for visioning, we wouldn't be able to build new leadership who have ownership of the organization. While the charter was an important step in starting a process of ownership for the new leaders, after having check-in conversations with the FOC, it was clear that the charter created a framework for ideology and goals of Floetic, but did not help with guidelines for concretizing these ideas and goals. Among the main reasons for this:over time, we need to consistently add and supplement the Charter with more specific how-tos, and contact information.

When asked what she thought about the Charter's impact, Wendy said,

> *When I think about the charter, I use it as a guide, but not something verbatim where I'm like I have to go along with everything that this charter says. It's almost like it's the basis of what this all is, and it's a great reminder all the time because its like in words, and it exists. But I think manifesting it in action is not necessarily exactly what the charter says, which I'm ok with too. And like I guess I'm seeing in terms of me, Heather, Jamie, and Pauline, [FOC], as a dynamic being more transparent with each other in some aspects, and definitely taking ownership, or **more** ownership of each other, which is really great.*

This quote from Wendy represents the ways in which the charter served as an ideological guide but not necessarily the Floetic instruction manual and logistical handbook that we had hoped. Comparing Jamie's request for a charter to be created, with Wendy's reflections of its impact, I have become aware of a dynamic that the charter as an intervention created. Creating and introducing the charter was intended to motivate a shift in ownership, but because the founders are the authors of the charter, it in some ways makes the founders vision and ownership of Floetic Fridays more concrete and less open to being changed. The charter on one level allows for sharing or handing over of ownership, but on another level it can solidify the ownership and vision within the founders. Thus, the next cohort of leadership becomes managers of past ideas rather than owners of the organization's mission and vision from conception and beyond. Wendy generally saw merit in the Charter, but from her quote I believe that it took time and actual practice of running Floetic Fridays and *enacting* visions for ownership to be passed down. Something that is clear to me after analysis, it is not as easy as just handing someone the blueprints and manifesto. Ownership requires meaningful support that allows risk-taking to occur. We cannot sustain projects if we give rigid directions of what is expected and what is to

come next. In addition to the charter, another one of the more structural or programmatic practices we introduced was the group retreats, which I will discuss in the next section.

Group Retreats

One of the main interventions we planned, was a two-part retreat for the FOC. The retreats were an attempt to bring organizers together in a physical space in which we could pause, reflect, grant ourselves a moratorium to relocate our visions and capacity. In analysis, I was able to identify the retreats as an inclusion of programmatic practices into our growth, being that it was a planned and orchestrated event to which FOC was required to attend. Building off the need for social and cultural practices, the group retreats were introduced as a way of creating support networks, bonding as a group, and building trust. After our first Floetic Friday event of the semester, and a collaboration with the Black Student Union for another event, we decided to take a break from holding public events or programming. It was time for us to take a break, and work on our internal organizing, and growth. It is important to note that the retreats were a structural and programmatic practice, however, they introduced cultural and social practices through the modeling rituals and also providing a time for bonding and storytelling.

The retreats were important steps for the group to demand their own process of internal cultural organizing; who was Floetic Fridays? Where was it going? Why did it matter? What culture were we perpetuating at Clark University? What needed to change? These were all the questions that desperately needed and still need to be discussed and played with for years to come. By holding a retreat, we attempted to give the FOC a renewed sense of stability and time to build as a collective and secure their vision for the coming months. Many cultural clubs on campus have retreats for bonding and revisioning, so we were not creating anything radically new, however our retreats focused on interrogating our groups dynamics through a lens of cultural organizing and relational practice. The retreats consisted of dialogues and activities which introduced social and cultural concepts of cultural organizing, Collaborative Ideation, active listening, dialogue and storytelling.

In our first retreat we opened the space by practice a story-telling method that I learned at the Highlander Center. Each member of the FOC was asked to bring an item that represented them. The space was set up with a circle of chairs and a table in the center. Each person in the circle was asked to tell the story of their object and place it on the center table, as a way of

placing ourselves, and our stories in that space. Later, we read the manifestos and mission statements of similar organizations, to learn about other methods and generate ideas for our own projects. A main component of the first retreat, was that we literally enacted a space for collaborative ideation. After I explained the concept by reading a piece of brown's book, we went around in a circle sharing some of our dreams, ideas and visions for Floetic Fridays and our community as a whole. This practice was powerful in reinforcing to the FOC that their visions matter and that ownership of Floetic is attainable if we utilize this platform and resources to enact change, and take risks. In addition, it was an important reminder that we can adopt and take inspiration from practices that have already been used and implemented by other organizers, we don't need to constantly reinvent the wheel.
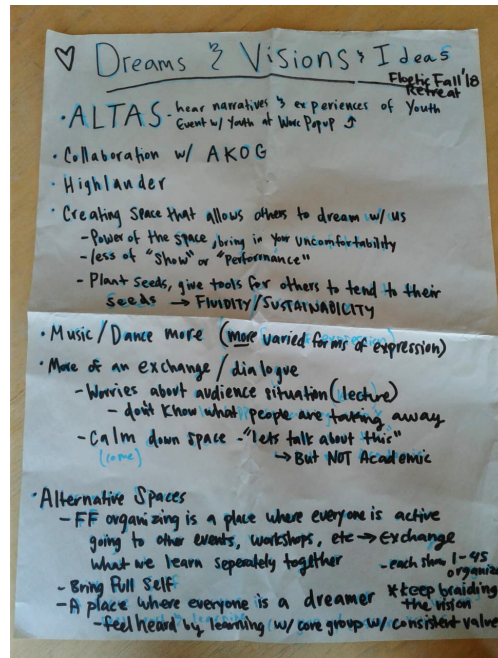
Photograph of notes taken during our Collaborative Ideation practice at the first retreat.

The second retreat started with a quote by June Jordan, "We are the ones we have been waiting for". This quote served as a jumping off point to inspire and challenge the FOC to take on responsibility and make Floetic Fridays a vehicle and platform to which they could actualize their dreams for the community, in other words we were hoping to grow ownership and vision.

Below is a piece of a conversation from our second retreat, that represents the need for us to introduce this June Jordan quote to the FOC. One of the Floetic founders, Jacob, was asking

the group if they felt comfortable with continuing one of the activities about role creation *without* the founders helping them, Jamie responded first.

Jamie- oh, that changes how I feel, cause like, I don't, the way that this is going to pan out, I'm gonna be real, the way that this is gonna pan out, or come into a list of understandings is going to look very different, us being just new organizers doing that, than you guys being here, like I'ma say that right now.

Rachel- Yea facts

Jamie- So we should take that into consideration

Arielle- How long is everybody gonna be a new organizer

Rachel- What'd you say?

Arielle- How long is everybody gonna be a new organizer

Jamie- You know what we meant though

Rachel- um, i'm doing 5th year

everyone laughs

Sadie- so you got a whole year ahead of you

Jacob- [louder than the laughs]
she's just sayin, no one is new anymore, everyone, we've all been here now

Wendy-
I think we should just hold ourselves accountable for what we haven't been doing and just try to do it.

This piece of transcript represents a navigation of ownership. Who is the "new" leadership, and when does that shift to being just plain ole leadership. It reminded me that in this work, while we never stop learning, there was a distinction between new and old leadership. Wendy's comment illustrates that there is a connection between accountability and ownership. I believe that accountability in this case, is about looking into ourselves as organizers and deciphering what our capacity is, and what still needs to be enacted for our collective visions to be actualized. This piece of transcript, also shows a lack of confidence that existed among organizers. As seen in this transcript these retreats served important ways to build confidence and shared visions, but also

question notions of ownership. The second retreat we also we introduced the social and cultural practice of intentional dialogue structures for the FOT to utilize in their meetings. The main dialogue practice that we introduced was standard, "Go-around style". One person poses a question for dialogue, each person has a bit of time to speak on that question, and then passing to the next. The dialogue in intended to go around the group twice with no interruptions or reactions until it is your turn to speak again in the round. At our retreats we used modeling to practice and demonstrate how this dialogue structure could improve communication. In the context of social change organizing and popular education, modeling refers to simulating or practicing methods of best practice to learn and adopt them as a group. The FOC is still learning how to actively listen and respect one another when speaking so this was an important structure for implementing equal voice from each person and time for reflection during the conversation itself.   In order to elaborate on this, I will discuss the usage of dialogue as an intervention in my next section.

Dialogue and Leaning into Conflict

Among any group of passionate organizers, there will be conflict. It's pretty much unavoidable that at some point there will be a chaotic last-minute decision that isn't consensus based, a disagreement that builds up over time, or natural personality clashes. There are many ways that I have seen these conflicts and behaviors occur within Floetic Fridays leadership development process, mostly through communication. As a group of extremely busy college students it is very difficult to find times for in-person check-in's and meetings, making digital communication unavoidable. The chosen digital communication platform of Floetic Fridays is "Facebook Messenger Group Chat". It is here where the group coordinates meetings, makes collective decisions, updates each other, and sends the occasional, "Happy Floetic Fridays <3 <3". In general, it's a big mess of emojis and miscommunications. While I am still very much learning about how to have healthy, productive, and meaningful collective decision making processes and conversations over Facebook Messenger, we were able to make an intervention to introduce productive dialogue tools to improve communication and conflict management. I would consider this intervention to be a cultural and social practice, because it was about shifting behaviors and actions to improve communication, rather than planning something programmatic. This took shape in a few ways, one being to have IRL (in real life) dialogues about conflicts that

occur in digital platforms. It is important to see our digital platforms as not just a communication tool but as its own location, its own space where meaningful discourse and vulnerability among leaders can exist. While it can be very easy on an ideological level to completely dismiss the role that digital communication plays in organizing, it actually became crucial for the FOC to have IRL meetings in order to address miscommunications that occurred in our online group chat. These IRL meetings usually took place somewhere on Clark's campus, and usually were facilitated either by a Floetic founder, or just those involved in the conflict. These IRL meetings were more programmatic in nature since they were a literal event of people coming together in a space to address issues. I came to see these dialogues as ways in which the group was choosing to 'Lean Into Conflict' rather than let tensions build-up. By holding dialogue to discuss conflicts, the group was able to adopt practices of meta conversation and pausing in our work in order to hold space and conversation for disagreements or misunderstandings that seem to be taking place within a group.

Below is a story of the ways in which this practice of 'Leaning into Conflict' took shape. I find it particularly interesting, because the FOC is discussing how their relationships are currently functioning, and how that relates to trust in their organizing:

After a long storm of passive Facebook group message miscommunications, the FOC decided to meet up. It was a few months into school and the new organizers were just settling into their leadership roles as Floetic organizers. There was a lot to be done before the first Floetic Friday of the year, and conflict had begun to arise within the group. The FOC had decided to hold the meeting at my work, in the University's Craft Studio, they sat at a circle table in the center of the room, and I sat listening, working at a nearby table, on the periphery. There were more people in the small Craft Studio than usual, but that didn't stop the meeting from taking full effect. After a long-winded conversation about the best methods for hanging art on the wall, Rachel, one of the new organizers said,

> *"I also wanted to talk about, like the group dynamic and um I feel, like right now, we don't like know each other that well, and I feel with this type of work that we are doing, trusting each other is really important, and having trust within each other."*

To which Wendy, another member of FOC, responded,

"There just has to be constant communication, like whether that means it's through messaging or in person. It can't be either or, it has to be constant, and wherever we are doing or what we are thinking about doing. Cause if we are gonna be honest, we are not all friends, like you know. So we can't, ya know, yea maybe we are gonna be friends at the end of this, but like I'm not the kind of person to be forced into a friendship, I'm the kind of the person to be selective with my friendships. So trust is earned and respect is earned in various different ways and it's just one way of doing it."

Dialogue and leaning into conflict, is definitely something that takes practice and was only really adopted by the FOC through constant encouragement from myself or another Floetic Founder, to talk about the things that aren't going so well within the group dynamic or decision-making process. However, with any new thing it takes time to adopt something into a group. But overall I believe that this is an important way to build trust and create transparency about capacity and needs. Engaging in dialogues was an important way for the group to hold space for each other and build trust in each other's vision for the project because it forced them to confront tensions and empathize with one another. In order to work together collectively we need to be held accountable for the ways that we communicate and relate to one another. This is also how we attempted to build ownership. If people are being held accountable and communicating, then they are more likely to take risks for each other and have a collective ownership.

Modeling dialogue structures at our retreats allowed FOC to specifically identify the issues that the group was having with their communication. The structure of go-around dialogue allowed everyone's voice to be heard in addition to there being a period of reflection and active listening while you wait to speak. The go-around structure was our default method to choose but members of the FOC had their own ideas to incorporate. At our second retreat, Rachel brought up the concept of L.A.R.A, which stands for, "Listen, Answer, Respond, Affirm". Rachel explained that for her this tool has helped her slow down and find ways to actively listen and communicate effectively. I found it exciting that members of FOC had their own personal tips and tools that they wanted to incorporate into the Floetic structures for communication. This move by Rachel also reveals that she was internalizing and personally engaging with the practices we were introducing to the group. She was not just adopting our words, but adapting

them to fit her own terms and habits, this evokes ownership, and shows she is finding ways to be transparent about her needs and what helps her.

In addition, the FOC was internalizing our moves to improve communication by theorizing personally. I saw this during our check-in with Heather. In the conversation Sadie asked Heather how they felt about passionate groups usage of Facebook Group Messenger for discussing important decisions and ideas. Heather explained,

"I mean it's not great, cause no one can tell the tone and also no one can tell how their messages are being received… like first of all communication usually happens, when it gets like all tense, in those long paragraph things. I get really really stressed whenever I send a long paragraph thing like even if it's not about inherently an internal group problem its just a me a problem, I'll feel like i'm taking up so much space and I feel bad about it. Cause you can see physically on your screen the space that you are actually taking in the chat and it bothers me alot. I don't like it."

This reflection from Heather stood out to me because she employed language that I often heard in activist spaces to refer to unhealthy communication within "In Real Life" IRL conversations which I explained previously, but they applied it to the digital platform. Concepts such as of "taking up space" entails that Heather saw the digital platform as a another space in which the collective must embody and commit to communicating with our values in mind. This was exciting to me, because she was speaking with an ownership of the ideas that myself and the founders intended to pass on about embodiment, intentionality, and active listening.

Learning from my own shortcomings during data analysis, I originally thought that the FOC ignored our attempts to improve dialogue, but in reality, I was analyzing their reactions too early on, and was looking for an overly obvious integration of these tools into their group dynamic. The ways in which they began to adopt dialogue structures and leaning into conflict was slow but has grown over time.

 In my second check-in with Wendy, I asked her if she had noticed an improvement in dialogue and communication among the FOC. Wendy responded,

> *I think I have noticed it, but what I have been thinking about a lot and has been coming up since the very beginning, is how to take like whatever we are dreaming about and actually make it real? And come to life and that's something that I think we all have been struggling with because I think I can dream and I can see*

other people's dreams, and I can work towards making those dreams come true
but then it gets overwhelming when we are dreaming too much and like I feel like
we are not doing anything and we become stationary. So I think that's when the
logistical part comes up a lot and not everyone is into that but I think like just
dialogues have been helpful in terms of like talking it out, really trying to solidify,
and like create concrete things that we can all do.

This response helped me understand that while improved communication is important, it is just a tool for addressing the need of leadership that enacts their vision. Unsurprisingly, the key to sustainability does not just lie in strong commitment to intentional dialogues and not using Facebook Messenger to make decisions. Luckily, the FOC understood this before I did, and they focused energy on finding time to talk and listen to one another as a way to hear out each other's ideas, make plans for next steps, and then committing to roles and tasks for actionalization. The dialogues were only one step in the process of concretizing ideas and making their shared visions a reality. At the start of this process, I thought that strong communication is what built trust, and trust was and still is a crucial element to sustaining collective cultural leadership. Through my reflection and analysis, I have come to realize that communication and dialogue is foundational in building transparency and ownership among leaders and that we also must learn from working with one another. Being in action with a group of people is a form of dialogue that we cannot recreate by sitting in circles. Dialogues are the basis for integrating active listening and building trust within our the actions we take within our organizing. The FOC is still learning how to do this, and it takes time. The practice of communication to build trust takes a long time. I have learned from my own partnership with members of the Floetic founders that we cannot expect to have perfect communication relationships with people we work with just because our ideas or politics align. To even get close we need to commit to growing together, failing together, reflecting on those failures, and then being okay with failing again. I believe that this knowledge of each other is what builds healthy and sustaining relational culture.

Shortcomings

Throughout this process it has been particularly difficult to see my biases and shortcomings, because I am doing research on a project to which I am a part of. This means that throughout the

praxis inquiry I have not only been processing and reflecting on the work of the organization but also the work of myself. At times, this makes it particularly hard to dissect what is truly going on. I want to take some time in my paper to highlight my shortcomings and the places where I have overlooked.

I originally thought that there are only three elements to sustaining Collective Cultural Leadership; vision, ownership, and transparency. While I think these are three extremely important aspects of sustaining collective cultural leadership, I also believe it could be argued that agency is a crucial element as well. Jaksch (2017) writes,

> A lasting culture of student agency passes on a legacy that informs and directs current and future students to know that they are free to create and develop whatever inclusive, open, and authentic space they desire on the campus. In this way, it becomes much less about sustaining any one particular program and more importantly about sustaining a campus culture that privileges student voice (130).

Jaksch is arguing that agency is vital in sustaining programs in authentic ways, because it allows for the freedom to create spaces that are free and open in the ways we want. This reminds me that the campus context of Floetic Fridays work is important in understanding what elements we need to sustain Collective Cultural Leadership, because there is such a tendency in spaces of Higher education to equate sustainability to institutionalizing. To echo Jaksch, if we focus on sustaining a culture which prioritizes student voice and agency, then future organizing will be strong and our communities will remain resilient.

Significance

In writing this section I want to intentionally shift my attention to addressing the past, current, and future Floetic Fridays organizers. This work is about them, about the relationships built, and the things we learn and create together.

Dear Floetic Fridays,

I am not sure who is reading this. Maybe you are currently an organizer of Floetic, and you are referenced in this paper. Maybe you used to be a part of our community but have since gone on and graduated. Maybe you have never even met me before, but you are now a part of the leadership of this work. No matter how you come to this letter, I want to say thank you. Cultural organizing is vulnerable and exhausting, but I promise that you are making an impact even if you can't see it yet. There are a few things that I want to emphasize within this letter about what I learned through this praxis project, and what it means for the broader community of activists.

First off, **we must collectively commit to the idea that we are working towards long-term visions of change.** Through this work I have been constantly reminded that while the need to radically change our world is urgent, it takes a long time for transformation to occur. This is not to say that we must de-escalate our dreams or stop dreaming at all, but rather we must understand that we may not ever see the impact we are building towards. A crucial element to visionary work is accepting that we are working towards a future that is so beautiful, we may not be the ones to benefit from it. As cultural organizers, we have to be okay with that. We build the infrastructure for everyday acts of rebellion against what we have been taught is normalcy. I believe that if we stop dreaming long-term then we are letting our oppressors win. If we choose to build our organizations around reactionary, urgent calls to action, we are centering our oppression instead of centering our liberation and collective freedom.

Building towards long-term visions of change demands that we value the slow, intimate, pauses within our work. Cultural organizing puts value on the meals we share, the laughs we have, the moments of failure, and the moments of trust.

Second, **by collectively dreaming for long-term visions of change, we are not only building from our future strength but from our ancestral strength and history.** As organizers, once we begin to accept that time is non-linear, meaning not arranged chronologically, we can receive strength from those who were revolutionary in our history and those who will be revolutionary in the future. I believe that by seeing our work as a part of a larger history and future for resistance, we can build a movement that is even more powerful than we have ever imagined. To quote brown, "Transformation doesn't happen in a linear way, at least not one we can always track. It happens in cycles, convergences, explosions. If we release the framework of failure, we can realize that we are in iterative cycles, and we can keep asking ourselves- how do I learn from this?" (105). Through this praxis project, I have learned that we

must constantly be asking ourselves, "How do I learn from this?", not to forever put ourselves in the cycle of academia, but rather to root this work in our past, present, and future.

Third, **cultural organizers wear many hats.** This work will never stop feeling like a whirlwind. In the Spring of 2019, a group of Floetic Organizers were driving to the Worcester Pop-up, the location for that month's Floetic event. We were all a bit stressed, trying to find ways to solve small issues that have come up along the way. Pauline asked the car, "Does Floetic ever stop being stressful? Like, is it always going to feel this chaotic? I think we all knew immediately, that the answer to that question was yes. This work is chaotic and stressful because making meaningful change is supposed to be hard and messy. As cultural organizers, we are healers, DJ's, technicians, emcees, singers, artists, social media wizards, chefs, facilitators, baby-sitters, and at the same time **we are people**. This work demands us to skilled in a multitude of ways, but it also demands that we show up as our authentic selves, ready to be honest, vulnerable, and transparent about needs and capacity.

Fourth, as a collective cultural leadership, we must **acknowledge difference and tensions if we wish to work from a place of love.** Despite working within consensus-based models for decision making, there is never a time where we can have total agreement. We are unique people with varying identities, strengths, and needs. If we stop working within models of homogeneity, we allow ourselves to hold time for confronting our tensions head on. Our interventions around dialogue and conflict touch at this. But I want to emphasize that in order to truly love, we must celebrate the diversity of thoughts, needs, and ideas that comes with community organizing and activism.

Finally, **we must allow currents of transformation to emerge naturally**. We can be strategic, diligent, and endlessly committed to our visions for change, but we cannot force outcomes. I have learned that sustainability does not come from forcing agendas, structures or entire organizations on to future organizers. Rather, we must pass down visions, power, history, relationships and then get out of the way. We must build spaces where people can feel resilient, brave, and inspired, and then watch as they grow and build on their own. We will never win if we don't accept that things need to modify, take hold and move forward. We build foundations for the future, but we cannot control what the future brings.

I have endless love for Floetic Fridays. This work matters and I hope that this project inspires others to continue asking how can we learn from our movements of social change; our future depends on it.

Sincerely,
Naomi Rose Weintraub

Works Cited

Benavente, Javiera. "Planning the Revolution Over Collards ." *Arts & Democracy* , Arts & Democracy , artsanddemocracy.org/detail-page/?program=bridge&capID=65.

brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. 1st ed., AK Press , 2017.

Crass , Chriss. "'BUT WE DON'T HAVE LEADERS' Leadership Development and Anarchist Organizing." *Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategy*, 1st ed., PM Press, 2013, pp. 165–170 .

Jaksch, Marla L. "Scaling up for Sustainability: Hip-Hop and Spoken Word as Vehicles for Transnational Inclusion ." *Open Mic Night: Campus Programs That Champion College Student Voice and Engagement*, by Toby S. Jenkins, Stylus Publishing, 2017.

Kuttner , Paul J. "What Is Cultural Organizing?" *Cultural Organizing*, 12 Aug. 2015, culturalorganizing.org/what-is-cultural-organizing/.

Kuttner, Paul. "Building Community Cultural Leadership." *Cultural Organizing*. N.p., 5 Aug. 2013. Web. 2018.

Highlander Education Center. "Mission & Methodologies ." *Highlander Center*, www.highlandercenter.org/our-story/mission/.

Milstein, Cindy. "Reappropriate the Imagination! ." *Realizing the Impossible: Art against Authority*, by Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland, AK, 2007. Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority .

Street, Joe. "Singing for Freedom." *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement*, University Press of Florida, 2017, pp. 15–39.

Werning , Kate. "20 Relational Culture & Undoing Individualism -- Mark Fairfield." *20 Relational Culture & Undoing Individualism - Mark Fairfield*, Healing Justice Podcast , 20 Mar. 2018, healingjustice.podbean.com/e/20-relational-culture-undoing-individualism-mark-fairfield/.