

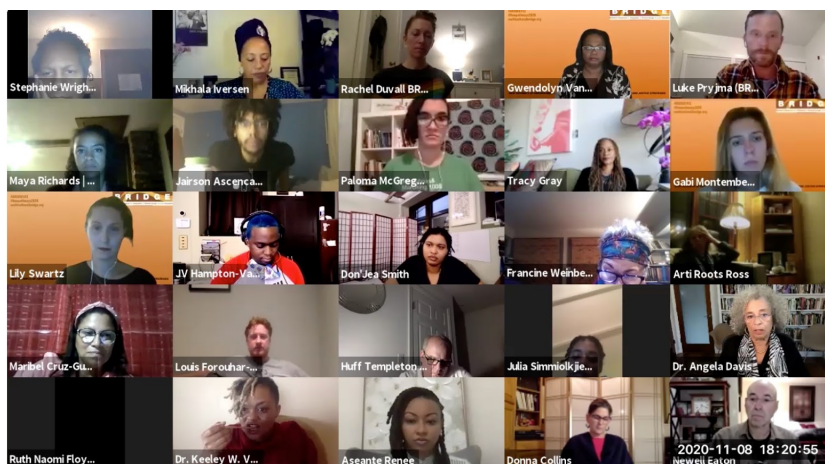
New Pathways of Empowerment & Transformation: Moving the Dial on Race, Class, and Justice Strategies

November 6-9 virtual conference

Remarks by Gwendolyn VanSant, BRIDGE CEO and Founding Director and conference curator

Friday Evening Opening Remarks | November 6, 2020

Welcome to the launch of our New Pathways Social Justice Conference. Tonight we are here to pave new pathways of transformative justice and healing while we move the dial collectively on race, class, and justice strategies. We also have supplemental pre-recorded sessions for the conference that are integral to this experience.



When we conceived of this conference, we hadn't experienced the pandemic, the airing of George Floyd's murder, the verdict of Breonna Taylor's murderers, and we certainly weren't living in this election limbo of this week with its many implications regardless of the outcome. But what better place to be but here tonight? And in such great company, even on Zoom... This way we have the benefit of a larger, connected network of community.

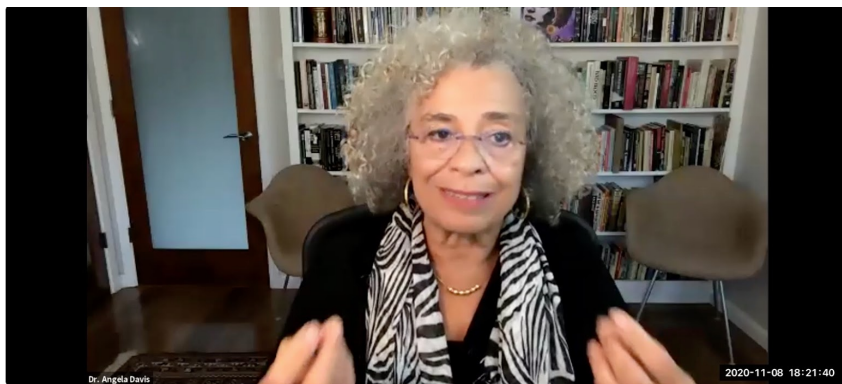
My name is Gwendolyn VanSant, CEO and Founding Director of BRIDGE. We are a small but mighty organization in the Berkshires serving as a supplier diversity program for the Commonwealth in equity and inclusion work, building cultural competence foundations across sectors, and creating pathways of access for communities and individuals.

We center our work around racial justice and address disparities in representation and reflection of our diverse communities. We recognize that inclusion still upholds a power structure, and we encourage us all to work on the many ways we uphold the very structure we need to dismantle. We work towards equity, safety, and justice as a daily practice among all of our stakeholders: staff, board members, constituents, volunteers, and our greater community.

I have the great fortune to speak about justice work and specifically about BRIDGE with **Dr. Angela Davis** on Sunday evening, including how our work has emerged differently over this

past year. For now, I want to talk about tonight. Our theme is accountability and how that shows up in this liberation work. We will explore this alongside our amazingly fierce speakers... What is required of us in radical civil action, civic engagement, and our collective thinking right now?

I want to remind us that the word “radical”, according to Dr. Angela Davis, simply means grasping things at the root. Davis also reminds us that the work and power lives within the people in the movement and not in our government. Our work is to figure out



and that privilege that we hold in this country and globally. In this critical work, we need to learn how to activate and listen deeply to those of us who have experienced oppression, violence, and trauma and also those of us who have the wisdom, fortitude, and resilience to survive and *thrive* as a people despite centuries of oppressive structures. We are being challenged now, but we cannot believe the lie that any of us are powerless. Fear wants us to believe that. But as the quote goes, we are the change we have been seeking!

My hope for all of our guests here is that we have offered a community of thinkers, mobilizers, activists, and artists to remind us of our collective center and our power source. That we remember to see humanity before any of these man-made experiments of race, borders, and gender. These constructs were all meant to preserve wealth and power, that single currency held so high in this country. What if our most valued currency was love, wisdom and education? What if our currency becomes the humanity we can each hold and care for in each other?

So, if this is your first time with BRIDGE, welcome. If you are a longtime or new friend, welcome. I want to thank our entire BRIDGE ecosystem and specifically our conference team, **Dr. Emily Williams, Aseante Renee, Don’Jea Smith, and JV Hampton-VanSant** with **Elie Yeo** keeping us on track. I also want to thank **Only in My Dreams** for their support of the conference boxes and bags! There are treasures in both. Be in touch with the office to make arrangements to get yours. We also want to thank our sponsors, and again, not just for sending us a check (although we appreciate it), but most importantly, for being committed active partners in the work... specifically by allocating resources to a space that will encourage us all to think differently, challenge the status quo, and reach for our mutual humanity as we develop new strategies together across sectors and identities.

These sponsors are:

Lennox Foundation (Premier) - Angela Davis
 Berkshire Bank Foundation, Greylock Federal Credit Union (Lead)
 Williams College Davis Center (Impact)
 Urban Labs (Impact partner) - Boston Outreach/Urban Labs Panel
 Walk Unafraid (Changemaker) -Scholarships to Conference for BIPOC and LGBTQ
 Hic Rosa Collective (Changemaker partner) - Falsework School pre-conference/Hic Rosa Panel
 Austen Riggs Center (Legacy)
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 Guidos Fresh Marketplace (Legacy)
 Blue Q (Legacy Partner) - a conference bag donation
 Willow Investments for Loving Change (Legacy partner) Sat Night reception *per regulations
 MCLA Foundation (BRIDGE-Builder)

Now I would like to introduce our board member **Ari Cameron...**

[View the full conference schedule.](#)

Saturday Morning Opening Remarks | November 7, 2020

Welcome to day 2! Today's theme is "**Public Health, Wellness, & Positive Mindsets for Transformation, Healing, & Justice.**" Through positive psychology, I have learned to apply our systemic analysis of gender, class, and race equity within a positive psychology framework. We employ the practice of appreciative inquiry when we ask the questions we want the answers to... When we go to help an organization with recruitment, we don't ask, "Why are there no Black people here?" We ask the question we are really asking, which is, "Why don't Black people feel engaged, invited, safe here?" and, "What are the existing barriers in the sector, workplace, and culture?"

When we begin cultural change work, we invite folks into a practice of grit. **Angela Duckworth** defines grit as deliberate practice, and that is what is required of us in liberation and healing work. There are no quick fixes. We are asked to be resilient, give ourselves permission to fail, and release ourselves from yet another falsehood of white supremacy that we have to achieve perfectionism. All we ask is that we learn from these failures and shift behaviors *next time*.

Positive Psychology is character study grown out of global research. Researchers studied the resilience of the global non-White community. We need to recognize our global strengths because these are what link us in our humanity. So today, we learn about ourselves; how to be compassionate, empathetic, self-aware; how to build on the knowledge and strength of communities; and ultimately, how we take care of ourselves in this crucial change work...Now I

want to introduce our keynote speaker, **Gibrán Rivera**. Gibrán is an internationally renowned master facilitator. He helps the transformation of leaders, networks, and organizations. He develops our capacity to work with complexity. He pays very close attention to dynamics of power, equity, and inclusion. Gibrán invites us into what he calls a forward facing remembering. He understands that our next evolutionary leap depends on trust and the currency of love, and he has devoted his life to defining better ways of being together in this world.

[View the full conference schedule here.](#)

Sunday Morning Opening Remarks | November 8, 2020

Welcome to day 3! Yesterday was historic! It gave us a moment to breathe and to celebrate for time immemorial! In her acceptance speech, Vice President Elect Kamala Harris said, “Dream with ambition, lead with conviction, see yourselves the way others may not simply because they have never seen it before...” It is remarkable that we have arrived here in this historic moment breaking all sorts of barriers. Yesterday during the 100th year anniversary of women gaining the right to vote in the U.S., we finally saw the glass ceiling broken with our first woman elected as Vice President. And she is a woman of color, a daughter of immigrants from Jamaica and India, and she is squarely identified as Black and Asian American. This representation and reflection matters. It matters that she is an alumna of Howard, an HBCU.

Amidst this celebratory moment, we have also heard this sobering reminder that we have so much work to do still... actions to take. And it is true. The President Elect has his own repair to continue in upholding policies that criminalized Black families and communities, leaving a legacy of impact. Choosing a running mate as he did—a decision Kamala Harris described as “audacious”—is only one step... A significant one, but one on a long journey. But for those of us here today, we know we have work to do on every level. Our history shows us that we cannot rest now. The fight over the past four years has to be sustained and doubled in order to support our new leadership, define democracy, and pursue actualized rights to freedom and prosperity for all. I shared this Angela Davis quote on Friday night, and it seems great to remind us all of it again today:

“Anyway, I don't think we can rely on governments, regardless of who is in power, to do the work that only mass movements can do.”

— Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*

New Pathways is about creating the space to intentionally acknowledge and build a road that does not lead us “back to normal” because normal has been lethal for so many. 2020 has brought us the clear vision that we can't go back, only forward. Social justice is about shifting resources of money, wealth, attention, and value toward positive social impact for all. That

shape shifting will create new paradigms, and these will be unfamiliar. We must all hold the knowledge that familiarity and comfort cannot meet the urgency of now.

“How do we build movements capable of generating the power to compel governments and corporations to curtail their violence?”

— Angela Y. Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*

So let's continue the work here! Our theme is “**Arts Scholarship, Anti-Racism, and Activism.**” We'll have a roundtable discussion with **Hic Rosa** and their guests **Nadine Naber** and **heidi restrepo rhodes** on justice and power. We will explore workplace methodologies this morning, arts and social justice this afternoon, and of course, we will be with **Dr. Angela Davis** this evening as we forge ahead to redefine America and its aspirations to be a place of opportunity and justice for all. Welcome.

bell hooks, **Don Miguel Ruiz**, and our keynote speaker **Gibrán Rivera** all mention that *love is the power source* that we all need and possess to impact change, and we know all too well that strategy can only take hold with trust, which only comes with careful relationship-building. Let's together begin to define this currency of humanity: love, trust, and conviction that will propel us forward... Now I would like to turn it over to our New Pathways co-conspirator **Aseante Renee!**

[View the full conference schedule here.](#)

Sunday Evening Remarks | November 8, 2020

In this very special New Pathways session, political activist, philosopher, academic, and author **Dr. Angela Davis** will share her perspective on race, class, and justice strategies from the 70s to the present. How does the history of struggle illuminate the contemporary movement? With this in view, how will we show up in the world in the 21st century to “move the dial toward liberation and abolition? Following Dr. Davis's presentation, panelists will share some of the innovations and strategies they are bringing to social justice work in the fields of organizing and advocacy, movement arts, and social impact work. **Tracy Gray** challenges us to dismantle barriers for financial access towards innovation. **Paloma McGregor** invites us to embody justice and anti-racism work. **Gwendolyn VanSant** urges us to see and understand the interconnectivity of the world as a mosaic through holistic vistas and strategies.

My remarks on the projects and innovations that are happening at BRIDGE:

Thank you, Dr. Emily Williams, for the introduction. I want to thank Dr. Angela Davis and Tracy Gray for a really enriching conversation so far. I know the question was a bit different, but honestly, I've just been thinking the last three days that “BRIDGE” is the answer. If I had a one word answer, BRIDGE is it. BRIDGE is the innovative, visionary project!

BRIDGE is a small, but mighty organization in the Berkshires, and we are certified as a supplier diversity program by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, meaning we are minority and

women-run and operated for the Commonwealth and beyond. We are focused on equity and inclusion work, building cultural competence foundations across sectors, and creating pathways of access for communities and individuals while we move as community organizers and activists. The pulse of our organization rests on the experience of women of color and their children through the families we touch in our community-based programs. Embedded in any workforce training we do are their stories, their thoughts, their requests and experiences as shared and experienced by our team. We are creating new pathways of access. The unique part of our work at BRIDGE is that we have all that pomp and circumstance taken care of. We have all the boxes checked. But really, at the heart of our organization is how we build bridges through our programs and connect to communities of color, women of color and the immigrant population. This is in our founding story, and it's the heartbeat of our organization. We center our work around racial justice and addressing disparities in representation and reflection of our diverse communities.

As I do equity and inclusion work, I'm consistently trying to illuminate that we don't want to just "include". Inclusion may be a stepping stone, but we're really working towards **integration** and ultimately, **innovation**. We recognize that working towards inclusion still upholds a power structure centering the historically dominant culture of the U.S. and we encourage us all to work on the many ways we uphold the very structure we need to dismantle. As a nonprofit leader, this is an essential question for us to unpack, AND, while we do that, we continue to work towards equity, safety, and justice as a daily practice among all of our stakeholders. That's what's really differentiated us for a long time.

Now in 2020, so as long as we've gotten rid of our federal leadership for good—that was making it illegal to train and speak about white supremacy culture and the legacy of race and racism in this country—**more and more people are talking about anti-racism in the workplace and in their bias and cultural competence training**. I'm really encouraged by that, but for a long time that was what distinguished our approach in workplace environments. Our training has always embedded that race analysis. You can't do or experience a BRIDGE training without getting the race and gender analysis.

Another thing we do in our operations at BRIDGE—which I feel is innovative and we've been working at it for a few years—is that we've developed and are working with an accountability practice within our nonprofit. We use an accountability model central to our governance structure for our board and organization that includes interactions among: staff, board members, constituents, volunteers, and our greater community. We offer language to individuals for identity, culture and systems so that no matter what sector folks are in, they are educated and literate in the struggle. Why? Because nonprofits in and of themselves, are one of the structures that uphold white supremacy structures. There are those who are donating, and then there's those of us that are in the hamster wheel, making sure we meet those expectations, shifts, and rules all of the time. It's challenging as a nonprofit leader to do this work and also try to disrupt that structure....especially as a Black woman. Because of that we've developed an accountability structure within our formal articles of organization where we talk about white supremacy and systemic racism *as it's playing out in our work in our interactions*. That, to me, is

a model I hope other organizations pick up until we figure out a different way to care for communities than what we are doing now, with all of the labor and care that nonprofits hold.

The next piece that I want to talk about is what Dr. Williams just spoke about and what we've been doing for 13 years straight... holding space for authentic conversation, even on Zoom! BRIDGE embodies a model of holding space for conversations to be centered around everyone's capacity to dismantle systemic racism and demystify and deconstruct class and gender barriers. Our practical work is nestled in exposing white supremacy culture and its impact in whatever sector we work with. We firmly believe we have to name and identify structures and the culture of Whiteness (and other oppressive forces) daily so that we know what we are working to remove. This isn't catering to Whiteness, but rather naming the problem so folks aren't so much trying to "fix" or "help" those who are not entitled to the benefits of Whiteness, but rather facing how they benefit from or have internalized racism.

In the BRIDGE community, we embrace everyone who is willing to work on their internalized racism. We create trust, create culture, and create a space where people can take risks and be vulnerable to expose what white supremacy culture. You just talk about it, name it. We help people look at where they see themselves in it. We continue to create these spaces to dig deep into this work and talk across the boundaries that get set up for us. We all believe *this is our lane... this is what we can do and what we can't do*. But what we've shown this weekend and what we show in our work is that we're all human beings first, right? Our human connections and relationships are what's key. So we work hard at creating spaces like this conference so we can have these conversations and get rid of these man-made constructs, whether it's gender, race, policies, or laws, borders, all of these things. They just keep us separate and keep us in certain lanes, but none of it really means anything. We have to really begin to see each other in our full humanity.

Our New Pathways series in the spring was, as many of you know, a reflex to the pandemic when people were struggling to think about getting back to "normal." As Tracy said, normal wasn't good for most of us, so we don't need to go back to that! We need to go *forward* with new pathways. I was noticing that when people were in a panic, they were going back to white supremacy structures that even they had been working to get away from. People bounce back to what they know in times of stress and trauma. I was compelled to create a space where we could continue to have these conversations and provide the resources to those who were making the decisions, which yet again ended up in White male hands or larger institutions. New Pathways was an interruption of that, but with an offering of education and community. This New Pathways conference is our New Pathways 2.0, a new iteration of what we began in the spring.

Again, we do not want to build a road that leads us "back to normal" because normal has been lethal for so many. 2020 has brought us clearer vision with the pandemic and the many events that have transpired, demonstrating the devaluing and the dehumanization of black and immigrant lives. I believe this New Pathways model of bringing folks together who are separated by degrees and the correlating concentrations, careers, religions, sectors, geographies, alongside our intersecting social identities... bringing us together to begin to dissolve these false

barriers that keep us apart, dissolve the lies and myths and create new partnerships. This is how we are moving the dial on race, class and justice strategies. The practices of listening, talking, probing and activating. The practices that help us center the humanity, voice, and experience of Black, Brown, gender diverse leaders and the voices of all of our marginalized neighbors. The practice of identifying the layers of barriers in policy, law, and practice... This is what we aspire to do to move strategically to design a new more just and equitable way.

We also brought this conference together largely with the promise of Dr. Angela Davis and the anticipated inspiration and education we can draw from her wisdom and life experience post-election, during this pandemic. I'm grateful, Dr. Davis, that you've come to speak to us with all of your wisdom. You're an embodiment of the experience of what it means to put your body in the work. I think you are an inspiration, and it is why so many people showed up this evening.

The last innovation that I want to talk about is our **Inclusive Leadership Cohort**. This is a new project at BRIDGE in collaboration with **Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation** and partners at **Greylock Federal Credit Union** and **Berkshire Bank Foundation** which is working with our local and regional leaders in an integrated peer cohort focused on inclusive leadership as a movement building strategy for change in January 2021. This is meant to be a peer-led cohort that's fully integrated in a movement building strategy. And what's really different is the movement building isn't left to just community organizers. We have all of our influencers, institutions, and organizations coming together with other marginalized groups to figure out how to move the needle in our county together, create new relationships and take risks together and hopefully, create a new paradigm. I'm excited. I've been working on this project for nine months with the arts sector, the business sector, and community groups to advance inclusive leadership in our region. And, as Tracy Gray mentioned, it's a project of figuring out how to do due diligence without all the things that keep people out, right? We're going to recreate how we evaluate work and who gets access to capital and for innovation. Concepts like emergence and movement-building apply to all sectors, and I am looking forward to our Inclusive Leadership Cohort where the traditional leaders of our county will be joined by those in the margins to create new relationships and ways of operating and making radical shifts.

I have also been speaking more about reparations work in the financial and wealth sectors over the last year and a half and how we can begin to create new structures that include and center the success of women and communities of color and that hold businesses and investors accountable to racial justice along with their socially responsible investing. And as Tracy mentioned the JEDI initiative where we begin to define and make our own metrics of due diligence to create access. That then opens the door for what will emerge next.

In short, BRIDGE continues to be the innovative incubator for a few solutions that take us on a path towards our collective humanity. Supported by community members from all sectors. The innovation and vision is alive in this Zoom space this evening and I want to pause here with a thank you Dr. Davis for being here with us and sharing your insights! Thank you again Dr. Davis for the message of strength and empowerment that I have to tell you, you have sprinkled all over us this evening. Again, Dr. Davis reminds us that radical simply and powerfully means

grasping things at the root! That's a little bit about what I'm up to, and I'm just really thrilled to have this conversation.

My remarks on what is required to pave new pathways to equity and justice in anti-racism work, community organizing, equity and justice work, and innovation.

What I am about to say, Dr. Davis sums up well in her book *Women, Culture, and Politics*:

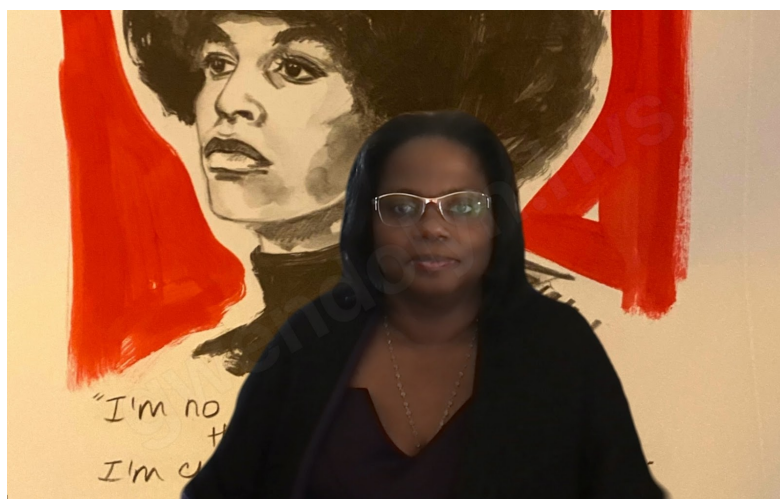
“The roots of sexism and homophobia are found in the same economic and political institutions that serve as the foundation of racism in this country and, more often than not, the same extremist circles that inflict violence on people of color are responsible for the eruptions of violence inspired by sexist and homophobic biases. Our political activism must clearly manifest our understanding of these connections.”

— Angela Y. Davis

First and foremost, get clear on your social and personal identity and its intersections, your assumptions, your bias, your relationships or lack thereof. We have been calling for this cultural humility, and it starts at home with yourself, your family, your organization. Focusing on the “other” never solves these issues.

Developing cultural, socio-political, and historical literacy—and the capacity to identify and speak about

dominant narratives, norms, behaviors and beliefs—alive in ourselves and in our culture... on the surface, just below the surface... and ultimately what is at the root!



There are many fascinating ways to approach creating this kind of cultural awareness. At BRIDGE, we do this through our Cultural Competence Foundations training where we support folks through developing an equity analysis and give them a framework to deconstruct culture, systems, and institutions on the individual and interpersonal level. Next, we move to what emerges in our version of equity and inclusion work towards integration. IDEA: Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access. Within our poverty analysis, we look at how barriers to access to resources (or the hoarding of resources) is at the heart of maintaining and sustaining the perpetuation of white dominance in this country. Eventually, our goal becomes full integration of diverse perspectives and thoughts and innovation to create new paradigms that not only provide pathways to equity, but repair the historical legacy of harm and exclusion. This will happen

through moments like what we witnessed yesterday in having Vice President Elect Kamala Harris take her seat in the White House.

We have an 11 year racial justice campaign because we need folks not only to be literate in our racialized narratives present since the founding of this country, but to be active, supported, and networked in their movement building. Our BRIDGE network has supported 32 weekly mutual aid efforts during the pandemic based on a decade of relationship-building and courageous leadership at BRIDGE. We focus on shifting and distributing resources while valuing the humanity of everyone involved. I could speak to so many other topics: police reform, arts and social justice, food security, and climate change, racial justice investing... No matter what the issue is, what is required now is activism and a willingness to let go of this society and culture as we know it. So, a few things...

1. Redefine institutions and their roles. This takes real vulnerability and courage.
2. De-centralize power. Use the structures that do exist to shift and re-allocate resources and ultimately build new cultural systems. New policies need to be created by the people most adversely impacted by current oppressive policies. Our legislators and lawmakers need to consult them and see *them* as the experts.
3. We need to not only learn and tell our real history, but actively *choose* to scribe a new story.

I want to close with the idea there is no sector or individual who is exempt from thinking about what they can do. What resources do you have and how can they influence positive social impact and change? If you are part of an institution with an oppressive history, how do you take tangible steps to reckon with that history and repair and make a new way? This is all of our work... all races, all generations. You have to be willing to put your body on the line as we see in the incredible legacy and journey of Dr. Davis.

This has been the beauty of this entire weekend. We're all participating in this solution and my vision, right? The fact that you're all here, you're speaking, you're listening. That's what I think is really crucial. We have to do all of the other things that we've talked about tonight, too. People have to open up their hearts and minds and become vulnerable and take risks. To create something when we actually don't know what it looks like... I believe my colleague and friend, Tracy Gray, the rocket scientist, says that is the way. But I also think that we just don't have any idea of what the new pathways are going to look like yet. We can only imagine what we're actually working towards. Everybody has to do what they can do in their own power. So look to the left, look to the right, ask the questions, be courageous, love, be introspective, and show up! I think that's all the advice I have to add right now. I have been blessed to have everybody here.

Kamala Harris said, "Dream with ambition, lead with conviction, see yourselves the way others may not simply because they have never seen it before..."

Monday Morning Opening Remarks | November 9, 2020

For five days now, we have gathered to pave new pathways of transformative justice and healing while we move the dial collectively on race, class, and justice strategies... Again, this weekend was historic... it gave us a moment to exhale, dance, and scream, and to celebrate for time immemorial the removal of a proud white supremacist and an installation of a President Elect that acknowledges systemic racism, his oversight and errors in prior leadership, and the educational importance of lifting up our First Lady Elect Jill Biden's leadership. And this is so significant to me because reflection and representation matters. He also has made history by breaking the glass ceiling by smartly choosing Vice President Elect Kamala Harris as his running mate.

I have shared this quote twice already here... In her acceptance speech, Vice President Elect Kamala Harris said, "Dream with ambition, lead with conviction, see yourselves the way others may not simply because they have never seen it before..." And Dr. Angela Davis reminds us... "I don't think we can rely on governments, regardless of who is in power, to do the work that only mass movements can do." As we've discussed, New Pathways is about creating the space to intentionally acknowledge and build a road that does not lead us "back to normal"...

Dr. Davis leaves us with this question...

"How do we build movements capable of generating the power to compel governments and corporations to curtail their violence?"

— Angela Y. Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*

Today's theme is "**Reparations. Sustainability. Impact.**" And because of this, I ask that you place your land acknowledgement in the chat. This should be a regular practice to honor what and who has come before us... When we think of repair, some of us have money to give or give back, some of us have land, some of us have platforms, everyone needs to do their part in repairing the harm of mental, physical, psychological, and emotional, generational trauma. It will take everyone to create that repair and then begin to reconcile, and it first begins with truth. We have had a mirror held up to us as a country these last four years. Our glaring lies and cancers in the U.S. have been exposed for four years, and so now we have no excuse but to get to work. Educate and activate in earnest daily work across all intersecting identities and roles... We welcome **Donna Haghghat, Erika Allison, and Malia Lazu...**

[View full conference schedule here.](#)

New Pathways will continue! In the meantime, please stay inspired and intentional. Remain Authentic and Activated. Embrace your vulnerability and allow the good work to happen! Again, thank you to all of our speakers, to all of our guests, and to **Aseante Renee** for being my co-conspirator for New Pathways! Thank you!