THE WORLD AS IT IS...
THE WORLD AS IT COULD BE
A Cultural Continuum for Consideration

CAROL “AKUA” BEBELLE

responses
Adam Bush, Tia Smith & Jack Tchen

editors
Erica Kohl-Arenas & Stephanie Maroney
WHO WE ARE

The Imagining America consortium (IA) brings together scholars, artists, designers, and cultural organizers to imagine, study, and enact a more just and liberatory ‘America’ and world. Working across institutional, disciplinary, and community divides, IA strengthens and promotes public scholarship, cultural organizing, and campus change that inspires collective imagination, knowledge making, and civic action on pressing public issues.

WE BELIEVE

IA is a values driven organization. We believe that it is important to struggle with the idea of ‘America,’ which represents both transformative freedom movements and living histories of oppression. We also believe that creative culture is an important site of liberation and that every human has the capacity to learn and lead. Learn more about IA’s 7 Guiding Values at imaginingamerica.org/who-we-are/we-believe

THE WORLD AS IT IS...
THE WORLD AS IT COULD BE
A Cultural Continuum for Consideration

CAROL “AKUA” BEBELLE

Foreseeable Futures #12
Position Papers from Imagining America
October 2023

responses Adam Bush, Tia Smith & Jack Tchen
editors Erica Kohl-Arenas & Stephanie Maroney
artwork & design Lidya Araya
Dear Reader,

Foreseeable Futures became an Imagining America (IA) position paper series in 2000, publishing keynote addresses from the annual conference along with responses from oftentimes younger artists and scholars in the IA community. The series was launched by then IA Faculty Director, Julie Ellison, with a talk from humanities advocate Richard J. Franke at the inaugural IA annual conference at the Chicago Historical Society that same year. Just one year old, IA was explained to the world in Ellison’s Foreseeable Futures opening letter, “Imagining America helps focus the combined energies of higher education and the public arts and humanities on building the commons.” Over twenty years later, this description still describes the heart of IA, a national consortium currently hosted by the University of California, Davis, that brings together scholars, artists, designers, humanists, students, community leaders, and cultural organizers to imagine, study, and enact a more caring, just, and liberatory ‘America’ and world.

With a pause in publication for IA’s second term at Syracuse University and the first term at UC Davis, we are pleased to restart this valuable public scholarship platform with Carol Bebelle’s essay, The World as It Is … The World as It Could Be: A Cultural Continuum for Consideration. There is not a better suited person to propose how we might build the commons. Co-founder of Ashé Cultural Arts Center and cherished New Orleans culture keeper, Carol is a longtime IA friend, leader, thinker, and doer who has consistently proposed that the way to heal the world is through ‘WE-Making.’ For Carol WE-Making is a lived practice of radical hopefulness where community connections, culture, artmaking, and storytelling help humans realize that we must be fully present for one another to survive and thrive in the world. Carol has consistently brought this wisdom and practice to the IA community for over two decades, demonstrating how we all have something unique to offer and to learn from one another.

Carol shared this message through a poem ‘Weaving Our We’ on the opening plenary of the 2014 IA National Gathering in Atlanta, Georgia. Nearly a decade later, IA awarded Carol the Randy Martin Spirit Award and invited her to present her Cultural Continuum theory formed through 25 years of leadership at Ashé Cultural Arts Center. The enclosed Foreseeable Futures essay is Carol’s written reflection of this work presented at the 2022 National Gathering in New Orleans, IA’s first in person convening since the start of the global Covid19 pandemic.

Concerned with rising attacks on cultural and political expression of BIPOC and LGBTQI communities and on women’s health, a reminder of the fragile state of grassroots democracy in the United States, Carol proposes that the answers can be found in our individual and collective journeys through the process of rooting, bearing, bridging, and making culture. At the heart of the continuum is bridging, as Carol explains, “Cultural bridging is not always an exchange for some way of being that we had before … As we move in the world, every circumstance we encounter and every person we meet offers us the opportunity to be open to the potential for change. … in recognizing the power that culture plays in our lives we can become more intentional about the opportunities to bridge ourselves or to inspire others to want to bridge with us.” This and other messages that Carol delivers through an exploration of the cultural continuum are critical reminders for anyone experiencing division and despair as they organize towards more just, equitable, and caring communities, be it in the classroom, a social movement, or a virtual or local community.

For this issue we invited the author to identify people to provide a response to the position paper. Carol invited friends and collaborators Jack Tchen, Tia Smith, and Adam Bush, and we thank them for their thoughtful contributions. We would also like to thank Lidya Araya, another longtime collaborator invited by Carol, for the beautiful artwork and design. Combined, this inspiring group of artists and scholars, actively strengthening the commons in their own communities, exemplify the cultural continuum of Imagining America. We hope that you enjoy this special issue as much as we do.

In community,

Erica Kohl-Arenas | Faculty Director
Stephanie Maroney | Managing Director
Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life
In 1998, when Douglas Redd and I founded the Ashé Cultural Arts Center ‘culture’ was commonly understood as a demonstration of fine arts, entertainment, and print and electronic media. Deeper dives into the subject matter of culture were mostly explored through university courses and the publication of scholars. After academia and popular entertainment, the most consistent and effective influencers regarding culture were our ministers, preachers, rabbis, imams, and priests. Back in the early years of Ashé, Doug and I challenged ourselves to not just do art programs, but to really connect with community and to learn about how culture is an important aspect of daily thriving and life in New Orleans. We made sure that Ashé was a welcoming cultural space, where the coffee was always hot, food was available, and kids were welcome. Doug had a way of being that was deeply connected to the long-standing traditions of slowing down time, porch sitting, and connecting with people on the street. This piqued the curiosity of neighbors and passers-by who eventually became a part of the Ashé community.

Over the years through events, programs, celebrations, and just being directly proximate with people helped me discover how art and culture could be a powerful tool for community development. It also helped me learn a lot about myself. The Cultural Continuum framework that I presented at the 2022 Imagining America National Gathering and explored in this essay grew from over 25 years of learning through my work with Ashé Cultural Arts Center, now celebrating its quarter-century anniversary. The human journey is a recurring adventure through the cultural continuum, the bedrock of the human experience, defined by rooting, bearing, and bridging traditions and folkways, and making new culture.

Culture is the core element of human individuality. Culture is a dynamic force in all our lives, and we are the captains of our individual life journeys. In life, circumstance and context are active forces we
perpetually encounter using the navigating system of our culture. This complement of rules, roles, rituals, traditions, and folkways react to each other and our circumstance and context to create our personalized continuum, which we repeat and that supports us as we evolve. I call it a Cultural Continuum. I have found that there are four points of the continuum:

i.      Rooting
ii.     Bearing
iii.      Bridging
iv.      Making

We complete this continuum many times during a lifetime.

The journey from Cultural Rooting to Cultural Bearing to Cultural Bridging is done many times in our lives as we encounter cultural variety and context. We subconsciously, at times, decode and then add these varieties to our cultural context. Food, language, accents, attire, music, values, an ever-expanding knowledge base – this and much more contribute to our ever-evolving sense of self. Who we are and who we consider our communities determines our sense of belonging and being connected. This is a core element of the human experience. Abraham Maslow spent concentrated time with Blackfoot Native Americans in Alberta, Canada and learned the deep value of connection and self-definition that is derived from being in and with your self-defined community.¹

The world knows the lessons he learned through what he terms Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. A truer attribution of that philosophy belongs to the Blackfoot people. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs affirms this as does Schaffer and Emerson’s Theory of Attachment. For so many of us, our lives are shaped by the forces of those who love us and those who don’t. Unless being different is a cultural feature of our identity, we adapt Cultural Rooting, Cultural Bearing, and Cultural Bridging to our cultural context to form our evolving identity. We must also remember that we are not only subject to roots that are given to us, but we become culture bearers for the generations coming behind us.

In the Cultural Rooting phase, we absorb the content initially as newborns and repeatedly as we encounter different circumstances of which we wish to belong. The critical questions for us are: How we be? Why we be? When we be? Who we be with? Who others be with us? The answers to these questions combine with newly acquired knowledge to create our rooting system for these different circumstances.

My rooting influences are very vivid, very strong, and very long lasting. I am the granddaughter of Baptist ministers on both sides, and I lived with my paternal grandparents until I was twelve. As a result, I was greatly influenced by inspiring oratory, beautiful and spirited music, and an expanded community that nourished me, cheered me on, and consistently demonstrated the values and behaviors which were held in high esteem by the community. The Carol of today is a product of those roots.

My organizational roots were influenced greatly by my first job after college. I was hired by the Orleans Parish schoolboard and tasked with expanding the involvement of parents in their children’s education, especially the ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) title program, which authorized federal aid for the education of disadvantaged students. It was a lot of work that was often frantic: preparing for meetings and planning and writing grants. We met the demand with quality work that had effective outcomes. A high point being that we elected the first parent ever to the Orleans Parish schoolboard. I learned how to work in a team. I continue to work collaboratively and in partnerships because I firmly believe teamwork makes the dream work. I’ve been a part of many teams that have made many dreams come true for our city of New Orleans. As we navigate our roots, what we bear, how we bridge, and what we make, we must also see ourselves as teachers, guides, and influencers for those who follow. This causes us to not just become but be able to effectively share and communicate our beliefs, rituals, and traditions with others.

BEARING: KNOW THYSELF

In the Cultural Bearing phase, we consciously and subconsciously put our rooted inputs to use, but not all at once. Some things absorbed in Cultural Rooting may even give us cause to pause. Socrates tells us that knowing thyself is the beginning of wisdom. Cultural Bearing gives us the opportunity to realize who we are becoming by virtue of the roots we have been given and the environmental influences that impact us. And from that our sense of identity emerges. The comfort that we feel with this identity is a core element of self-confidence. The extent to which we feel dissatisfied with ourselves positions us for the bridging point of the continuum.
Perhaps the best position to be in is to know ourselves and be clear about the path of growth and development which we want to undertake, while also knowing that who we are is under construction. In this circumstance, we understand we are never going to be perfect, but are proud knowing that we are in the process of becoming better than who we are now. Oppression and bullying can depreciate our capacity to be confident and pleased with who we are. Aligning ourselves to the identity that others see for us can position us for more work in the bridging and making parts of the Continuum. It can also destine us for personal distress and fragile self-confidence. When this happens, we find ourselves in tension with ourselves and that can be destructive over time.

In my personal experience, my awareness of Cultural Bearing became very heightened at the age of twelve when I moved from my grandmother to live with my mother, stepfather, and brothers. I was very clear on who I was in the community that I was leaving. It was now very important for me to figure what part of that would be helpful to me becoming part of this new family and neighborhood. Fortunately, the values of my first rooting experience as a granddaughter of Baptist ministers were very clear about being helpful, respectful, and open to welcoming new people into my intimate world. So, the transition became a smooth one. The bond between my mother and I grew and the relationships with my brothers became very strong. It took me a while to come to know my stepfather, but in time that too became strong. I received Cultural Rooting in both homes on the shared values of family, helpfulness, and service. However, moving between these homes made communication difficult at times, so my experience of Cultural Bearing was also shaped by an awareness of my inbetweenness, which influenced my teen development and into adulthood.

At the institutional level, my awareness of Cultural Bearing became critical when I joined the second class of freshman at Loyola that had Black students. Being overwhelmed by a culture that was neither Black nor Protestant, made it uncomfortable to own my Blackness and own my commitment to being Protestant. Choices of paper topics, questions asked in class, and how I chose to participate all became part of how I express my Black womanness and my Protestant self. The study of philosophy and theology opened my mind and my heart. My studies of theology led to years of spiritual exploration. When I left Loyola, I spent five years attending a Black Catholic Church as a Baptist. I was drawn to the church through their youth outreach and the opportunity to work in an administrative role at a Catholic school, and I eventually became Catholic. However, I witnessed contradictions in the Catholic Church, especially around women’s rights and roles, which led me to leave and return to my Black Baptist roots. Through this experience of Cultural Bearing, I had to be in integrity with myself.

**BRIDGING: BELONGING**

Cultural Bridging is the next part of the continuum. Bridging is the adaptive phase. During the bridging phase we negotiate
and accommodate new roots, or we see some other way of being or thinking that attracts and we take it on. Bridging can be more subtle as it requires some contemplation and can result in behavior adjustments. But it is not always subtle. There are times when we can do something dramatically different than we used to. And in doing so, we find something that we enjoy more. Bridging encourages openness. When we are faced with an opportunity to bridge, our ability to be open gives us the opportunity to seek and find added aspects that may serve our individual lives. Cultural Bridging is not always an exchange for some way of being that we had before. Sometimes it is the expansion of thinking, seeing, being, and believing the way we had before. As we move in the world, every circumstance we encounter and every person we meet offers us the opportunity to be open to the potential for change. Most times our negotiation through Cultural Bridging happens at the subconscious level, but in recognizing the power that culture plays in our lives we can become more intentional about the opportunities to bridge ourselves or to inspire others to want to bridge with us. As a New Orleanian, I can tell you that there are millions of people that want to bridge with New Orleans culture. Our music, our language, our food, our very way of being are all magnetic and attractive to many people all around the world.

The bridging process is not always easy, especially in a broader culture marked by hierarchy and differences in power and privilege. Historically, human hierarchy has been an accepted, yet also always protested, way of life. Monarchy, oligarchy, conquerors, chiefs, and other conquering maneuverers ruled their worlds. Everyone could feel good about themselves if they felt better than someone else. Others accepted this reality or revolted against it. Hierarchy existed then and now. The world as it is, is becoming more and more disturbing. It is a cause for concern and fear. But concern and fear will not make change. In too many instances, fear breeds anxiety and anger and we become defensive and aggressive. Aggression has become a common reaction to fear.

I observed a shift during the 2010 Arab Spring uprisings, the following Occupy movement, Black Lives Matter, the LGBTQ+ Movement, as well as right wing movements like the Tea Party, conspiracy theorists, etc. that arise when people are feeling angry about being overlooked. Groups of people and individuals feel that others get better treatment, that they want their humanity to be respected. They want to feel like they belong in their country. These feelings of fear, anger, isolation, and resentment sometimes inspire aggression towards those with different backgrounds, and an entrenchment of divisions. For every person we lose to fear and violence in the process of becoming their better self is lost to the good work that they could do in the world as a human being. Every time that we push someone else out, we are also limiting our capacity to become our better selves.

From the prospective of the Cultural Continuum this is because of the Cultural Rooting and Bearing we have experienced up to this point in America. The acculturation processes have esteemed sameness and rejected difference. They have also inspired fear and competition in lieu of openness and collaboration. Often difference breeds apprehension. Bridging is a capacity we all have but it often is prompted by the loss of the comfort of the rooted culture and the need to reestablish a comfort zone with other people in another place. This can lead some to resent the new place and new people. Identifying them with the loss of the feeling of superiority, security and belonging. If you add issues of compensation, admission, housing, healthcare, and acquisition of wealth to the scenarios then even more resentment can occur.

The need to belong is a foundational element of the human experience. Humans were not intended to live in isolation, disconnected from one another. If we focused on learning from, knowing, and gaining positive feelings from one another instead of separation and fear, then we can grow ourselves. Ultimately, we get our essence from one another. I call this the ‘We-World.’

Namaste “The humanity in me acknowledges the humanity in you.”
Ubuntu “I am because you are.”

As humans our journey is influenced by when and how we “WE-make,” select, and include people for our community. Belonging is
the core element of the human experience. Our well-being is experienced and modeled through our sense of being a part of a bigger enduring existence of family. WE-making acknowledges this reality and calls us to behave in ways that encourage togetherness. WE-making draws attention to the core elements of life, such as family, friends, belonging, love, and the essential expression of humanity. WE-making raises consciousness, and advocates for our ultimate well-being which develops from our interconnection with each other.

Most of us acculturate and WE-make using our subconscious automatic method which only occasionally catches our attention and gravitates to the familiar. Each of us exist in a sphere of influence at work in the world. We are both navigating our lives at a conscious and subconscious level, but also influencing others sometimes intentionally but often unintentionally. The voyeurs, the seekers, the visual learners are all looking at us and we are masters unaware and therefore missing the opportunity to be available to spark, inspire, validate, or encourage others.

Our individual sense of self derives from our community, and we then exude our presence in a way that causes others to feel worthy of their participation in the community. Give and take, call and response, the sincerest form of flattery, imitation, all assure that the foundational elements of culture continue. For my Cultural Bridging example, I return to my college experience. As trying as the experience was of being a minority – a Black person in a newly-integrated White college in the 1960s – there were several opportunities for me to grow as a person by trying new things, expanding my believing and thinking, and really growing my content knowledge in many areas. My bridging wasn’t always a straightforward thing because I found myself constantly aware of the fact that I always wanted to be true to my rooted identity. As a sociology major, I spent a lot of time in reflection and in conversations with my best friend about what it meant for us to be there – to be good students and to be true to our identity as young Black women.

The need to belong, be accepted, and feel worthy amongst peers underlies the bridging instinct. It is reinforced by repetition. In a new environment, we encounter new things. We come to understand the value of things to the new community when we spend time and become part of a routine where we repeatedly experience behavior and attitudes as they are expressed in that community. For example, we generally don’t use profanity in a church, temple, or synagogue out of respect. If we were to work in any of these places and become accustomed to the infrequent use of profanity overtime, then our use of profanity will probably decrease and maybe even discontinue. This is adaptation at work. Our accent can change. We learn local lingo. We eat new foods or old foods differently. Our standards of quality and beauty can all be expanded in our efforts to bridge under these circumstances. This reality lays the groundwork for our ability to continuously expand our “we” community, or sometimes change the identity of people who you once called “them” into members of our “we” community. We develop new habits and, over time, warm up to and become part of our new community. We don’t lose our place in the community that we are rooted from, we just find ourselves belonging in a wider community that we have become a part of. This is WE-making at its best – a constantly expanding concept of the communities that we belong in.

The ideal is to have the various communities that we belong to extend from the specific community we started with to the larger community of a national democracy. In other words, can we really become fellow Americans who support the values we espouse? Most of us have several communities – family, work, friends, hobby circle, travel, etc. In a democracy, the majority rules, but a democracy also professes ideals of equity and justice. How can we ever expect to create a common culture for America that supports equity and justice? We can’t expect it, we the people, must create it. Every one of us are actors in this movement.

**A CULTURAL MANIFESTO**

1. We recognize the power of culture in our lives
2. We begin to pay attention to what we bear and bridge
3. We recognize the cultural roots we have, even the painful ones
4. We become intentional in how we move in the world (ex. language, attitude, behavior)
5. We create our own personal cultural manifesto answering these questions with rigorous honesty:
   - Who am I?
   - Who do I want to be?
   - What will I do?
   - What won’t I do?
   - What is my commitment?

Make sure your manifesto is a living thing and adjust it as you move through life. It’s something we could revisit every year or on our birthday to build a ritual to it. For example:

1. I am a member of the human race.
2. I am an African American woman.
3. I will always honor other human beings.
4. I will lead with compassion.
5. I will help when I can.
6. I will seek to understand where others come from.
7. I will learn from my mistakes.
8. I’m a life-long learner.
9. If I can’t help, I’ll try not to hurt.
10. I look forward to being better than I am today.

As a child, I grew up in an environment where family and cultural norms were explicit. It was an environment where you were expected to follow the rules, and to sometimes rebel and reject them. Nevertheless, whether you accepted or rejected rules, they existed. Today, the diversity of cultures in America and the cultural revolution have muffled our capacities to know what is expected. In the face of the confusion, many of us feel disconnected from and in search of meaningful principles and practices to guide us. Improving our awareness and demonstration of WE-consciousness can help us create and share guiding principles and is critical to social survival. Ultimately, WE-making is an active reminder and commitment to our intimate participation in the human family and the movement to establish a truly democratic and equitable nation on the planet.

MAKING CULTURE: THE MOTHER OF INVENTION

Culture Making is the most creative part of the Cultural Continuum. We make culture as a problem-solving strategy. Sometimes it serves as a practical solution to a life challenge. Technology, for example, has been a great asset in the support of human endeavors and activities, but technology has not come without its own set of challenges. The more we know and use technology, the more we decrease historical ways in which we related to each other. This in and of itself is not necessarily problematic. Replacing human connection and human intimacy in a predominant way
should give us a cause to be concerned. Because technology today is introduced to children at a very young age, their capacity to have the wisdom to balance is no longer part of the Cultural Rooting mechanism unless the cultural bearers make it so. Parents and grandparents have taken on technology-free zones in homes to assure that children have a balance of useful technology to support their education and to grow their capacity to relate to their peers, family, and general society personally. The power of human presence should not be overlooked. Elders and olders recognize this and are intentionally working to create cultural roots that remain and remind those coming next.

I have found the Cultural Continuum to be an easy and ready frame of reference in caring for my intimate, personal circles and community. It gives me ready insight and assurance that there are ways to navigate differences and challenges and a reminder that we are all on the same journey of becoming. Every point on the continuum is valuable and has great importance; however, the star of the continuum is Culture Making.

In my life, I have three instances of Culture Making:

The first instance is the redesign of our family Christmas ritual. When my mother died in January of 1977, I realized my youngest brother’s birthday which was Christmas would be perpetually sad from missing our mother. I also knew that my two brothers’ families would grow and that it might be hard to get together with them to celebrate Christmas. So, I encouraged us to gather after midnight mass (they are both Catholic) to make our own new Christmas ritual. So now, every Christmas morning at 2:00am we gather (minus Covid quarantine interruptions) and now my niece and nephews have rebooted the tradition for later in the day.

The second instance is from my term as Founding Executive at Ashé Cultural Arts Center. We wanted a way to bring the city’s attention to the marvelous history and contributions of Black people and the horrific condition under which we existed while contributing so greatly to the culture, economy, and very existence of our city. Responding to the call for port cities where enslaved Africans were brought to America, Leia Lewis partnered with the Ashé Cultural Arts Center to create the first MAAFA in New Orleans. *Maafa* is a Swahili word meaning “great tragedy,” given to us by Dr. Marimba Ani who thought that the horrific transatlantic slave trade was most clearly expressed in the language of the people who had been affected by it. This effort was further developed by the annual MAAFA celebrations led by Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood, a native New Orleanian, and founding Senior Pastor of St. Paul Baptist Church in Brooklyn. So, every year on a Saturday before or after the 4th of July, we gather at 8:00am all dressed in white to honor our ancestors in New Orleans Congo Square, a most sacred place for people of African descent. There we remember their sacrifice and we connect ourselves to work toward the liberation, equity, and justice for all people.

At the MAAFA ceremony, music, dance, and prayers in traditional African, Native American, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist are offered, and we also visit locations where enslaved Africans were auctioned and sold. An invited speaker provides an inspirational message. By the end of the ceremony, we go to the Mississippi River to give floral offerings to the enslaved people that transitioned during the passage. The motto for the MAAFA is, “The past we inherit, the future we create,” and it is a point of meditation during the ceremony and a point of provocation for us to continue the work as we leave the ceremony to go back to our lives seeking equity and justice.
And finally, in 2019 New Orleans celebrated its tricentennial anniversary. The city received ambassadors from around the world throughout the year. Special accommodations were made between the incoming and outgoing mayor so that the administration’s transition would not interfere with the tricentennial celebrations. Particularly for African American communities, the celebration brought back sad memories of when Africans were enslaved. This shameful and painful history in the African American community was symbolized by the very symbol that is the symbol of New Orleans – the Fleur De Lis. For African descendants, this symbol was seared onto slaves who dared to run for freedom when they were caught and returned. The planning for the MAAFA celebration in 2019 caused us to think deeply about whether something might be done to bring about some healing. We conferred with our board member, Reverend Dwight Webster PhD, the founding pastor of Christian Unity Baptist Church and an African studies scholar. The decision was made to create a redemption ritual (youtu.be/94tSX_pHCj8) in the MAAFA for the Fleur De Lis. The choice to redeem the Fleur De Lis in lieu of countering was decided when research revealed that the symbol stemmed from the Egyptian hieroglyph that represented the lily growing along the Nile. The ceremony was filmed and shared with the tricentennial committee in addition to being made available for the general community for the remainder of the year. This is a dramatic instance of making culture to serve the purpose of healing in the community.

Making culture is a sweet spot in the continuum because it allows us to be intentional in creating more roots in the culture garden, and it empowers us to imagine more and better ways to make the core culture more inclusive. In many ways, this aspect of the continuum is a much-needed prescription for our country today. Our failure, since its beginning, to create a culture that supported the ideals and values expressed in the founding documents “We the people,” “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” “of, by, and for the people” are all values set loose in the world without the culture to fertilize culture bearers willing to assure that the culture was created and existed going forward. Amendments have provided more ideas with guidance for interpretation in law, but the real work of growing a culture to assure the ideals prevailed has not yet been generated. Amendments helped to isolate and affirm more ideas which we codified in law – the right to vote, bear arms, etc., but the failure to create a common culture core to support these ideals contributed to the cultural revolution we are having today. Having the ideals and rooting them in values and rituals and behaviors and language makes it possible for individuals to bear the culture – demonstrating it and practicing it with each other. In contrast to a true grassroots democracy, the racialized patriotic identity of America has prompted the harmful question of who is a “real American” – long used as a self-protection for founders and their descendants re-fashioning blame and sinfulness of the land theft and genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of stolen Africans, and the oppression of Jews, Asians, Muslims, women, and other minority groups into privilege.

Poet Nikki Giovani advises, “One ounce of truth benefits like ripples on a pond. One ounce of truth benefits like a ripple on a pond. One ounce of truth benefits like ripples on a pond. … Remember, I tried when I’m gone.” Each of us are an energy source at work in the world. Our actions spark actions and reactions. Movements help to change the world because individuals bring their energy together for a common purpose. The challenges before us today require movement but also every person able to be in an intentional effort to be aware and engaged in being an agent of change. Push back on those belittling and bullying others. Don’t be so quick to shut your heart and mind. Be eager to listen. Be brave enough to disagree. Let others know what you think and believe. Be willing to help. Agree to disagree without estrangement. Claim your power to be an important part of the needed change. Work to remove blame and shame from your methods of disagreement. You will discern more ways to be a better version of yourself. Most importantly, hold on to the hope our ancestors did, and we are here to show for it. Bryan Stevenson reminds us that hopelessness is the enemy of justice. Hope is not naive, unsophisticated, or inexperienced. Hope acknowledges hardship and suffering, and it has a long vision that verifies hope has patience.

The world could be so much better than it is. We have diminished the power of women being in control of their bodies. We are allowing fear to restrict us in the control of automatic weapons in civil society when anyone’s child, mother, sibling could be assaulted or murdered doing everyday activities. We have let ourselves be hoodwinked and deceived by manipulators selfishly attending to their own needs. In denying
compassion and support to fellow citizens, we have failed to recognize that their diminished existence affects us. The empty grocery store shelves, accessibility to medicines and supplies, and the absence of teachers in quarantine should have shown us that our lives are inexorably connected. There is a way in which we all are a contribution to the betterment of our own personal lives and the lives of our society. Can we count on you to be a cultural agent of change? Will you take responsibility and stop waiting for others? Will you make equity and justice your inspiration? Will you go where they – partisan politics, gender politics, immigration politics, religion politics – lead you?

The time has come for us to recognize that if we are equal then the just thing for us to do is to not just speak truth to power or to call people out. We must recognize the need to call folks in. We must be about the business of WE-making. The heart of the matter is that winning and losing are fragile measures of victory. People living freely in liberty and pursuing happiness is our benchmark. How far away are we? What will you do to help us close the gaps?

Of, by, and for the people requires us to be actively involved in the operating of our society. The minimum is voting. We should be looking into the many other ways to make our society of and by us and not just for us. In my foreseeable future, I see more people becoming knowledgeable and competent as they navigate themselves and loved ones through the Cultural Continuum. I hope we realize that we must behave in a way that attracts people and we must be open to the possibility of being attracted to others who sometimes think differently than we do. We should work together to find ways to make sure that we all are cared for, seen, and that everyone’s voice is heard. Good will come to everyone when we can see ourselves as a necessary part of the American equation. Our progress will emanate like Nikki Giovani’s ripple on the pond and another generation of America will have improved on the model that was given to us by our founding fathers and mothers. This vision is part hope and part commitment. My hope is that those of you reading this will be radically hopeful with me in all facets of our life.

BIOGRAPHY

Carol Bebelle is a native New Orleanian.

She holds a bachelor’s degree from Loyola University in Sociology, a master’s degree from Tulane University in Education Administration, and has a 20-year career in the public sector as an administrator and planner of human service programs.

Carol led a private consulting firm and is a published poet and essayist. In 1998, Carol Bebelle and Douglas Redd founded Ashé Cultural Arts Center (Ashé CAC), an organization dedicated to community and human development using culture and art. Ashé CAC became a central player in the rebuilding of New Orleans, particularly the Central City community and the cultural landscape for artists and culture bearers. She ended her term as Executive Director of Ashé Cultural Arts Center at the end of 2019.

Carol is a popular panelist, commentator, and advisor on the foundational and transformative power of culture. She has participated in international, national, and local processes aimed at emerging the resilient and healing powers of culture and art for cultural, social, and equitable change in the world. She is an active member of her community and a dedicated servant leader.

www.akualproductionsnola.org
RESPONSE #1

JUMP-STARTING WE

Jack Tchen

Even online, we become part of Ashé’s annual Congo Square commemoration hailing the unspeakable mass social violence of hundreds of years of enslavement. The MAAFA singing and drums and dancing invite all to in-gather, to follow the beats into a growing spiral, to feel the movement, to breathe together, to re-member the past, to re-imagine a future, to be present. Mere words are never enough.

Deep inhale.

We live a time of dangerous authoritarian colonialisit nostalgia. These snarling paranoid attitudes have been organizing everywhere it appears. US Democratic Party Liberals respond by saying “democracy” is being threatened. It is, of course. But, what a weak response!

Deep exhale.

The cascading impacts of global warming at 1.5 C just for the month of July, has already produced the orange skies in NYC and failing coffee growers in Colombia and untethering neo-liberal supply chains – compounding and cascading to all places for eons.

1. Carol!

I absolutely share Carol Bebelle’s “radical hope.” Her modestly brilliant “cultural continuum” is a desperately needed challenge to the death culture we are wallowing in – the scattered debris of what sociology’s patriarch Max Weber described as “the spirit of capitalism and the Protestant work ethic.”

Amidst the apocalypse, we have no choice but to remake where we are; each eco-niche is a place of transformation, starting now. No need to click for a promised delivery from Amazon they can never deliver. Only we can nurture lively, regenerative, eco-regional places again.

2. We connect with deep breaths.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs, another favorite wisdom-keeper, fully complements Carol’s continuum facilitation.

Bridging

Alexis: “Our breathing also carries memories and intentions for living people who are not in the room.” And breathing is a “field through which folks who are no longer breathing, our ancestors, can travel into the room.” If we breathe “hoping for change . . . we will have more access to each other and the energies that can move us through this moment and the next.”

Carol: “As we move in the world, every circumstance we encounter and every person we meet offers us the opportunity to open to the potential for change.”

Making

Carol: “Making culture is a sweet spot . . . it allows us to be intentional in creating more roots in the culture garden, and it empowers us to imagine more and better ways to make the core culture more inclusive.”

Alexis: “Our breathing is sacred because the energy that connects us is older than any of the structures we are unlearning and will persist beyond the imagination of [our human] species. The energy moving through us, as air and so much more, is eternal.”

Chi is the flow of circular deep breathing through our bodies’ energy systems. In this circle we re-energize together. In motion, we open into a space of creativity.
3. Reflecting together, deep time/place

What do people do after unspeakable, trauma and brutality and “social death”? Ashé’s in-hailing of the past forges a pathway expelling anxiety, bitterness, and resentment. If we stick together, a future is possible.

In honoring the enslaved ancestors at Congo Square, we witness the resilient spirit of ancestors and descendants activated with each other.

This MAAFA approach is the people-to-people, exemplar Act Three. This is a sacred ceremony that cuts to our foundational settler colonial experience – dispossession, enslavement, extractivism.

4. All is alive.

Quoting Professor Leroy Little Bear: “In Aboriginal philosophy, existence” both objective and subjective, material life and spiritual life, “consists of energy. All things are animate, imbued with spirit, and in constant motion. In this realm of energy and spirit, interrelationships between all entities are of paramount importance, and space is more a referent than time.” Breathing, spirit, and energy are best understood as a shared cultural commons, free and immeasurable.

When European colonializing cultures reduce all people and the planet into materialist commodities to be bought and sold to produce wealth and power, the spirit of culture-bridging and culture-making is also measured and commodified.

The life and spirit of real meaning and real intercreative connecting is always suspect to be contained within suffocating systems of materialist exchange. “Understanding the differences in worldviews, in turn, gives us a starting point for understanding the paradoxes that colonialism poses for social control” (Little Bear).

Like the Oppenheimer dilemma, this relentless quest for dominion over nature incubates and accelerates a culture of materialist objectification. Like the Barbie-Mattel dilemma, breathing the same air and good social relationships are forever stalled, devalued, and mediated.

5. Renewal

In contrast, Carol Bebelle’s practical theory builds our capacity to interconnect and to lead creative, synergistic eco-cultural systems where the soil, air, and water create renewable freedoms to live good, fulfilling lives.

Jack (John Kuo Wei) Tchen is the Clement A. Price Professor of Public History and Humanities, Rutgers – Newark.

Works Cited

RESPONSE #2

THINKING, COFFEE, & THE CULTURAL CONTINUUM

Tia Smith

My life is consumed by thinking. My role as a researcher, educator, and anthropologist, opens space for me to think deeply and ponder how I have come to know what I know. This practice of deep thinking, possibly overthinking, is motivated by my quest for an explanation to the big picture questions of “why” and “how.” Conceivably then, my journey in thinking, sits at a crossroad of privilege and practice – where I conceive of the world as it is and imagine the world as it could be. Oftentimes, my thinking is fractured, disorganized, and random. I am easily excited by colors, sound, smell, or memories that collide and disrupt my flow.

For example, as I am writing in this moment, the smell of percolating coffee fills the air, and its scent reminds me of my Aunt Maggie. Aunt Maggie’s tiny apartment had a permanent fragrance of Folgers coffee. As a child, I loathed this smell of her coffee and cringed every time she would greet me with a kiss on the cheek with the heaviness of left-over coffee flavor on her breath. Aunt Maggie never reacted to my dissent of her coffee; she was unbothered and comfortable with her daily cup of joy. I would have never imagined that as an adult, I would come to cherish coffee and require to experience its bold flavor daily. Like many people, it is my must-have morning ritual. My preferred coffee is a non-Folgers coffee (no offense to those who love it) and I drink it in a special mug that reminds me, You Are A Badazzz. My other dozen mugs are placed uniformly in the cupboard, untouched and waiting for a welcoming companion. But I prefer to drink it solo, unbothered, no talking. Just thinking.

When did this shift occur and what new influences seeded my habit of coffee drinking? The cultural continuum, as Carol Bebelle suggests, operates as a framework to organize my thinking to help me make sense of how my habits, both good and bad, are informed by culture as a process. Bebelle reminds us that culture is the element of the human experience that shapes our evolving identity. Therefore, over a lifetime, the cultural continuum of rooting (returning to our influences), culture bearing (realizing who we are becoming), culture bridging (finding belonging), and culture making (being intentional) are intricately linked to my memories of coffee, triggered by a daily smell. The ritual of my Aunt Maggie drinking coffee and my eventual fondness of coffee is all a part of that cultural continuum.

Thinking for me is a privilege as my career literally requires me to think, excessively, and ultimately to solve problems. My dad would argue that my “thinking job” is not actually work, it is idle. It doesn’t require an exertion of physical energy, movement, or rationale for fatigue. My dad, now retired, was a bus driver in a metropolitan city for more than 30 years. His day began at 4am with a boiled egg for breakfast, bran muffin and coffee, a ritual that helped him prepare for the day of transporting working-class passengers from the mixed income residential neighborhoods to the large office buildings of downtown, in which he took great pride in ensuring their safety. After his last shift ended at 4pm, he ate a bologna sandwich then would head back out to his second job as a taxi driver.

His work was repetitive, driving the same route and stopping at the same spots to drop off and pick up passengers. He would often meet the same faces every day and over the years he befriended many of them. He valued routine, timeliness, and familiarity. Thinking, as he understood, was a luxury. It was something he had little time for and had considered frivolous. He had a job to do, so he did it. Full stop. My dad’s ideas on the matter of what constituted work was amplified in 1987 when Nike introduced a campaign around the slogan “just do it,” which my dad managed to work into every conversation about the significance of working and doing.
Again, my rooting and bearing of how I learned the nature of “work” can be understood by returning to the cultural continuum. Whether its coffee or thinking, how I come to know what I know about the world is reimagined many times over. My identity is shaped by the mightiness of my childhood experiences and connected by the introduction of new experiences that emerge during my life journey.

And so, I think. I drink coffee to soothe. And I create rituals along the way.

RESPONSE #3

ASHÉ: COLLABORATIONS OF THE CULTURAL CONTINUUM

Adam Bush

I first met Mama Carol during a Community Sing at The Porch, a Cultural Center in the 7th Ward where she and Wendi O’Neal were facilitating an informal and open gathering for participants to bring their voice and memories into common space and be in fellowship together. As we sang it was clear the Sing was both a place to memorialize and celebrate collectively. A place to bear and bridge. To root and make together. That was the first time I heard Mama Carol’s voice.

I had read Mama Carol’s words before I met her – she had contributed an essay to the published collection Civic Engagement in the Wake of Katrina, which I helped proofread as a graduate student and so I sought out the chance to meet her. After the gathering I approached her and sort of clumsily spoke about what College Unbound (which was then in its first year) was trying to do and thanked her both for her words in that edited volume and her voice that day. Two days later I missed a call from her, but I have saved the voicemail message she left for me these many years. I still listen to it as a reminder of the work left to do. Mama Carol said in that message that our work needed to be radical, it needed to support the next generation of cultural practitioners, and that the way to start was just to start. That voicemail and the conversations that followed spoke of a world – not just a higher education – where people are valued and recognized for their work, where we come together to learn while breaking bread, and where learning is both actionable and soul affirming.

It was prophetic in nature.

But of course it was.

Dr. Tia Smith is a Research Manager with The Opportunity Agenda, a social justice communication lab. Tia assists non-profit organizations and activists with narrative strategies to dismantle white supremacy. Tia is a mom of two young adults and lives with her husband in New Orleans.
Listening to that voicemail now, what I hear is her Cultural Continuum. She has been embodying this Continuum and theorizing this work her whole career. The language she gives us in these pages provides a critical handbook for how we can teach and share what those of us who have been working with Carol have always known: that culture is precious and must be tended to collectively and in deep relation with one another. We just need to be reminded of that work. We need to hear it.

I knew to go to the 7th Ward Cultural Center that day because Imagining America’s 2009 conference in New Orleans had introduced me to that space. Now celebrating its 25th year, the Ashé Cultural Arts Center has been a touchstone of necessary cultural continuity since its inception. As Carol writes, that work became perhaps even more critical, certainly differently visible, in the years following Hurricane Katrina when Ashé served as a place for those displaced to feel rooted. It is curious now, looking back to the past, that Ashé was not the central organizing space of that 2009 convening. Carol and her words are so present in Imagining America’s theory of change today. What does it say about our listening back then – and our different listening now – that we could gather without the critical culture bridging of Ashé? What were we not yet ready to hear?

Back in 2010, after Carol and I had started working together, we called our shared program “Ashé College Unbound” – yes because of its collaboration between our two organizations – but also because in leading with “Ashé” – to speak it into existence – we were speaking all of College Unbound into existence. CU didn’t yet know what it was back then. So much of what we have now become was created through our collaboration. “We are” because “this has happened.”

In a 2012 essay Carol and I co-authored with our founding Ashé College Unbound collaborators in 2012 in the first issue of Imagining America’s journal *PUBLIC*, ACU students wrote:

We are Ashé College Unbound – a group of artists, educators, and culture bearers associated with the Ashé Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans, Louisiana. … We have come together in a new way and with a new, shared cause – to create and support one another toward a college degree. Through service-learning projects and volunteer opportunities, we have helped others within universities get their degrees. Now we create a new space to help one another and look to provide a new model for colleges everywhere. Ashé is a higher ed institution … because it is one thing to build an institution within a community that you reflect and it’s another to document or observe the experience from the outside.

Those words have guided College Unbound’s work over the past decade. College Unbound today strives to be in deep partnership with place and purpose; to support a culture of collective learning that traditional higher education doesn’t yet hear. One where the boundaries of credit, classroom, and community are all blurred together. Where students are deep co-collaborators of what needs to be learned together. Carol changed all of College Unbound.

The Cultural Continuum speaks in big ways about how culture is passed down, felt, and mobilized. But it also is so strikingly intimate. It is a way to be together and in one another’s lives. At the 2014 Imagining America conference Carol premiered a poem she wrote, *Weaving Our We*, that continues to theorize this. “WE yearn for belonging” Carol writes in the opening stanza. But that belonging is never just found in those that are like us.
It is found also through difference, not just coexistence but collective memory and collective imagination:

Some stay, some leave, some melt into us.
Absent minded, automatic, like breathing sometimes.
But, also Intentional, like a patient weaver, WE hold the common thread while adding color, pattern, to loop together in the making of our unique design for life.

*****

Mama Carol’s Cultural Continuum is a recipe for a gumbo she has served many times at Imagining America. The Cultural Continuum is about difference and change just as it is about memory and preservation. Yes, I knew Mama Carol’s words first in that essay collection I edited before I knew Mama Carol. But really, I knew of Mama Carol before I knew Mama Carol really because to have faith in this world is to know with certainty that there are people who have imaginations that stretch generations, have hearts that bridge cities and make bustling boulevards, and have capacities of generosity and care that feel endless. That, too, is what the Cultural Continuum allows – a faith that culture will sustain us and connect us and push us to where we need to be.

*****

Adam Bush is the cofounder and President of College Unbound and, with Mama Carol Bebelle, the cofounder of its focused program to support artists and cultural bearers in New Orleans, Ashé College Unbound. Adam directed Imagining America’s Publicly Active Graduate Education fellowship program from 2010-2012 and sat on Imagining America’s National Advisory Board from 2010-2019.

CAROL BEBELLE’S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to take this opportunity to thank Imagining America and Erica Kohl for the opportunity and the provocation to crystallize the thinking that I have had over the last twenty-five years about culture. The first time was when I was commissioned to do a poem for the annual IA National Conference in 2014. I am especially thankful to the Imagining America organization for its existence. Its name reminds of the necessity to continue to serve the purpose of evolving America.

At a time when humanities and arts are in jeopardy in higher education, it is critical for us to have the advocacy that Imagining America offers. It is becoming a revolutionary act to teach humanities. This aggressive response to the fear of the demographic shifts in our country is leading those who lose standing in the demographic hierarchy game to seek to obliterate history, stymie evolution and growth and curtail innovation and creativity.

We all must accept the responsibility of being citizens and we must accept the responsibility of filling the portion of the equation that requires us to participate. In closing, I want to express my appreciation to my right and left hand Antwamesha Jenkins and Dwan Adams without whom this essay would not have been completed.

*****

IMAGINING AMERICA’S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Imagining America thanks Carol “Akua” Bebelle, Jack Tchen, Tia Smith, Adam Bush, and Lidya Araya for their contributions to this publication.

The idea to feature Carol’s work on the cultural continuum originated in
her opening plenary address at the 2022 IA National Gathering in New Orleans, LA. Organized in partnership with Tulane University and Ashé Cultural Arts, Rituals of Repair and Renewal brought the IA community together in-person for the first time in three years to enact rituals of reflection, repair, renewal, wellness, and imagination.

We offer our sincere gratitude to collaborators at Tulane and Ashé, and the incredible artists who participated in the opening plenary: Asali De Van Ecclesiastes, Sunni Patterson, Kumbuka Drum & Dance Collective, Caren Green, Jarrell Hamilton, Sha’Condria “Icon” Sibley, Drena Clay-Johnson, and the incomparable Frederick “Wood” Delahoussaye.

**ARTIST BIOGRAPHY**

Lidya Araya is a creative designer, producer, event planner, entrepreneur, adventurer, dreamer, humanitarian, environmentalist and productive community member. Lidya has spent 30 years working in the creative arts field as graphic designer and corporate branding manager as well as the event production world as a producer. Lidya is an advocate for cultural arts and community building. She has worked with various non-profit organizations over the years and recently just finished her term as Board Chair of Efforts of Grace / Ashé Cultural Arts Center.