

# The Beauty of Transformation

## Becoming a Cultural Organizer

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THOUSANDS GATHER AROUND A MAKESHIFT MOVIE THEATRE IN TAHRIR SQUARE to watch raw footage of the very protest in which they are taking part. The occupation of Wall Street, and cities across the globe, is accompanied by a new wave of political posters. A viral Internet campaign calls on people to “drop the i-word” when speaking about immigration because “no human being is illegal.” And climate change activists around the world collaborate on the first ever “global satellite art project,” creating works that can be seen from space (Henn, 2010; Kuttner, 2011; Nagy, 2011; Sen, 2013).

The progressive social movements that have captivated the world over the past several years have been hotbeds of creative arts and media production. Theater, puppets, cartoons, posters, music, dance, videos, ceremonies, and other forms of cultural expression have been essential to these uprisings, just as they were to movements of the past (McAdam, 1994; Reed, 2005; Street, 2007). After all, the goals of these movements are as cultural as they are political. Participants seek not only to change policies but also to change the way we think and act — to enhance our understanding of climate change, to challenge our prejudices around immigration, to reframe the morality of income inequality, and to encourage outright revolt against oppressive governments.

As a theater educator, arts activist, cartoonist, and scholar, I have spent much of my life working at the intersection of art and social change. I have developed a firm belief in the potential of artistic work to “inform, inspire, engage, animate, and motivate social action” (Korza & Bacon, 2010). But I have also found this to be a complicated endeavor — particularly when it comes to linking arts with more traditional organizing efforts.<sup>1</sup> Aesthetic and political priorities don’t always mesh perfectly. Organizers can be skeptical of the need for cultural work, while artists can be wary of allowing their art to be shaped by political concerns. If we are going to support the development of creativity in social movements, we need to move beyond just celebrating the power of arts for social change towards a better understanding of what it takes to do this difficult, hybrid work.

To this end, I have spent the last several years studying the purposeful integration of arts practices and organizing practices, not only during “movement moments” (Sen, 2011) but also in

the day-to-day work of social justice organizations. Most recently, I spent sixteen months volunteering and researching with Project HIP-HOP (PHH), an organization in Boston, MA, that trains young people to use hip-hop and related art forms as “cultural tools” to “educate and motivate our community” (Project HIP-HOP, n.d.). Among other questions, I wanted to understand how participants experience the relationship between arts and organizing in their work: Do they see it as a natural synergy? A set of parallel tactics? A difficult balance?

As I met the powerful youth and adults that make up PHH, I began to see how the relationship that I was studying existed not only in the organization, but in each person. Perhaps, in order to better grasp this relationship, I needed to understand how it manifested within individuals. What leads an individual to live at the intersection of art and organizing? How does one develop as both an artist and an activist, and find ways to combine these passions? What tensions and challenges arise? What kinds of spaces, teachers, mentors, and experiences help develop the necessary capacities and commitments?

In this article, I explore these questions through a biographical portrait of Mariama White-Hammond, the Executive Director of PHH. Tracing Mariama’s development in the realms of artistic practice and social justice, we can see that the relationship between the two trajectories is a complex one: while at times they complement one another, at other times they produce tension and conflict. We can see that context dramatically shapes this intersection. In some spaces, the two activities merge seamlessly, while in others they diverge into silos that can be difficult to breach. And we can better appreciate the complex web of influences that shape one woman’s journey.

In constructing this narrative, I draw on interviews and conversations with Mariama and others who have worked with her, participant observation, and analysis of related documents such as an article written by Mariama’s parents. The research methodology I use is portraiture, a qualitative methodology that bridges artistic and scientific ways of knowing. Like ethnography, portraiture takes a phenomenological stance towards knowledge, seeking to understand the perspectives of participants and how they make meaning of their experiences. In a research landscape that so often hones in on deficits, particularly when writing about people of color, portraiture seeks “goodness,” and relies on mutual meaning-making and relationship building between researchers and participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I have extended my use of portraiture through comic book-style drawing, an emergent practice in qualitative research (Kuttner, 2013; Jones & Woglom, 2013; Williams, 2012). Throughout my research I collected photographs and video, on which I base all illustrations. I hope that the images included here will give you a sense of Mariama that I could not put into words.<sup>2</sup>



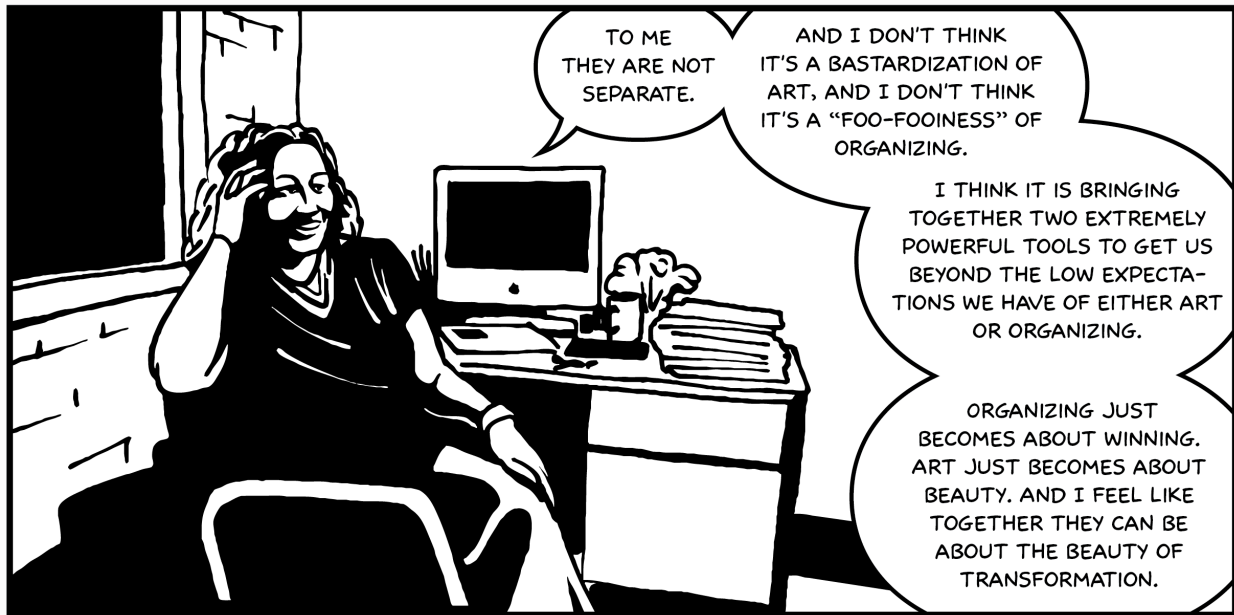
### The Cultural Organizer

My first interview with Mariama takes place in her office, a small room at the top of a three-story building in the Roxbury region of Boston. A single window set in exposed brick lets light fall across her desk, which is topped by a thin Apple computer screen, a pile of miscellaneous papers, and scattered pens. A framed poster hangs on the wall featuring a web of hip-hop artist names. Mariama is dressed in solid black, making the blue stones in her bracelet and necklace all the more striking against her brown skin. She turns in her office chair to face me, throwing out one of her easy smiles.

Once a youth member of PHH, Mariama has served as the organization's Executive Director for over a decade. Under her watch, PHH has evolved from engaging young people in the history of the civil rights movement to a *cultural organizing* model that blends organizing principles and artistic practice. An emerging field of social justice practice, cultural organizing is about "placing art and culture at the center of an organizing strategy and also about organizing from a particular tradition, cultural identity, and community of place or worldview" (Benavente & Richardson, 2011, p. 2). During my time with PHH, I witness youth creating an original piece of street theater addressing community violence; running an open mic; throwing a Kwanzaa

celebration; and bringing their artistic talents to a coalition fighting for affordable public transportation.

Mariama has long had a passion for both politics and the arts. When not running PHH, she serves as a youth pastor, sings in her church choir, and takes an active role in Boston politics — a workload that keeps her in constant motion. These days, she says, “I consider myself more of an organizer than an artist,” largely because she finds little time in her busy schedule for her own individual creative pursuits. But Mariama’s conviction that arts and organizing are complementary has been a driving force behind PHH’s new model. As she explains it,



One of my first questions for Mariama is, “How did you come to this work?” In answering, she takes me deep into her familial and cultural roots. To understand her transformation into the cultural organizer I sit with today, she tells me, there is only one place we can start.

## The Black Church

Mariama’s grandfather moved from New Jersey to Philadelphia to become the pastor of Golden Gate Baptist. It was there that he met and married Mariama’s grandmother, a schoolteacher from Surrey, North Carolina. And it was in that church community that young Ray Hammond, Mariama’s father, was raised (Hammond, White-Hammond, & Lennon, 1999).

Ray writes that his parents instilled in him a passion for both faith and knowledge, intertwined with a sense of social purpose: “I was taught the old adage that service to others is the rent one pays for being on earth. My pursuit of faith was nurtured by song, sermon, and the search for truth in my own life and in the lives of others” (Hammond et al., 1999, p. 146). Driven by this pursuit of knowledge — a “real nerd,” his future wife would call him — at 15, Ray Hammond enrolled in Harvard Medical School, joining the first wave of young black women and men at prestigious, predominantly white universities. On the face of it, his decision to go

into medicine veered away from the path his father had taken, but faith remained central to his work. As he explains, he was being called not to medicine but to “a ministry of healing” (p. 147). Still, the pull of the church would strengthen over time, eventually leading him into the ministry in 1976.

Gloria White, daughter to an air force sergeant and a homemaker, lived a nomadic early life. To a lesser extent than her future husband, faith played a role in her development through church. She was also influenced heavily by the political upheaval of the era to “become a physician in service” (Hammond et al., 1999, p. 152), leading her to Tufts Medical School. While she was in school, she met Ray Hammond at St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Cambridge, MA.

The two were introduced by the pastors of St. Paul at the time, Bishop John Bryant and Reverend Dr. Cecilia Williams-Bryant. Uncle John and Aunt C, as Mariama calls them, are well known for ushering in the “neo-pentacostal” movement in the AME church, which revived Black religious practices rooted in African culture that had been kept out of the church for a century in the name of assimilating into mainstream America. During their five years at the church, the two dramatically built up the congregation, reintroduced African drumming and liturgical dance, and transformed St. Paul into a “rocking church” (Mamiya, 1994). As Mariama explains, “We had been told that our drums and our dance were unholy, and [Uncle John and Aunt C.] didn’t believe that was the case. The bible talks about making a joyful noise.”

Ray and Gloria married, staying heavily involved in St. Paul while moving forward with their medical careers. Into this hectic life of healing and faith, Mariama was born in 1979, and her sister Adiya three years later. Then Ray and Gloria were commissioned to found a new church — Bethel AME. Born in the White-Hammond dining room, Bethel would eventually come to be housed in a stone building in Boston’s Jamaica Plain. In 1999, Ray described the church this way:

We call Bethel “a Bible-believing, Holy Spirit-empowered congregation.” It is a family of three hundred members — adults and children from all walks of life, including the young and the elderly, high school dropouts and college and graduate students, married couples and single people, political refugees from several nations and young refugees from city streets. Most of the congregation is African American, but we also have white, Latino, and Asian members. We are a work in progress, a family in the making (Hammond et al., 1999, pp. 148–149).



MARIAMA AS A TEENAGER, “BRINGING THE MESSAGE” TO BETHEL, HOUSED AT THE TIME IN AN OLD SCHOOL BUILDING.

When I ask Mariama what church she grew up in, she does not say St. Paul, or AME, but simply “the Black Church.” In doing so, she stresses her involvement in a faith-based and a racially-identified community that extends far beyond a single set of walls. Mariama was raised in the arms of a strong, predominantly Black community that “nurtured and loved” her. Having since worked with many young people who lack the supports they need, Mariama is grateful: “I can’t underestimate the importance of having that really strong, tight community;

experiencing what I think everybody should have, at a very early stage in my life.”

### Pride, Responsibility, and Justice

Mariama’s early church community promoted a deep sense of racial pride. The congregation was made up of many African Americans who had been trailblazers — from being the first in their families to attend college, to being one of the first Black astronauts. “I grew up in a place where I never saw that there were limits to what Black people could do.” Gloria and Ray were trailblazers in their own right, as the new face of the Black middle class, and actively encouraged this racial pride in Mariama. They enrolled her in the Henry Buckner School, one of the first Afrocentric preschools, established in the 1970’s, where she remembers meeting Rosa Parks and reenacting the Montgomery bus boycott.

This pride came along with a strong sense of responsibility.



Both her parents demonstrated this sense of responsibility — or calling — through their work in Boston’s communities of color. Gloria was one of the first doctors at Boston’s South End Community Health Center, a grassroots clinic founded through the efforts of community activists to serve the Latino community. She also founded a creative writing program for young girls called *Do the Right Thing*. Ray co-founded the Boston Ten Point Coalition, a group of Christian clergy working to empower Black and Latino youth. Over time the two became well-known and respected leaders in Boston. But their high levels of involvement also took a heavy toll on them, at one point leading them very close to ending their marriage (Blanding, 2006).

From the time Mariama was 10, the family lived in Roxbury, a center of Boston’s Black community that has seen major disinvestment for decades (Medoff & Sklar, 1994). Though Mariama urged them to move closer to her suburban Christian school, her parents refused because they “didn’t want us to be disconnected from the fact that everybody is not doing well in the world. And your job in life is not just to do well for yourself, but to really figure out how you create a world where people can be doing well.” She remembers that “everyone was welcome in our backyard...we grew up with everyone. My parents always had us treat everyone with respect.”

Mariama’s parents also involved her, occasionally, in service activities such as serving food at a shelter on a couple Thanksgivings, or taking Liberian refugees into their home. But the focus was less on explicit activism and more on “being part of and helping to maintain a strong

community”

## Performing Arts and Creativity

Mariama’s father played the piano and the violin in his youth, and passed these instruments on to his daughters — Mariama took the piano, her sister the violin. But Mariama knew him better as a dancer. Ray studied dance at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts — a local institution founded in 1950 to “meet the artistic and cultural needs of Boston’s African American young people” (Smith, n.d., para. 4) — dancing the part of Joseph in the school’s annual performance of the Black Nativity. Ray also became the first AME pastor to participate in liturgical dance.

Mariama’s mother, meanwhile, had a background in comedic theater, and infused bits of creativity and art into everyday family life. When her parents founded Bethel AME, Mariama’s mother brought her creative play to that space as well, putting together comedic and educational performances for the children in the church. In fact, church offered many of Mariama’s early opportunities in the arts, performing in plays and singing in the church’s children’s choir, *Angels Without Wings*.

School offered opportunities for the arts, but much of Mariama’s formal arts education took place in extra-curricular spaces in the community. She studied at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts, and at the Roxbury Center for the Performing Arts, another predominantly Black arts school. Unfortunately neither of these institutions exist now. But arts experiences were not always positive. In seventh grade Mariama joined the Ballet Theater, as the only Black girl in her class. Though she found the school and its instructors to be supportive, she was put off by the culture of the ballet scene:



MARIAMA, PLAYING DRESS-UP AND MAKING MUSIC AS A GIRL.

It was hard being a black girl. Once I hit puberty I wasn’t a skinny beanpole anymore and they had trouble with it. [Other dancers] became anorexic and I was just not interested in being anorexic. What was really rewarded in my ballet theater was not OK in my neighborhood. Being skinny was not desirable in any way.

Despite being involved in choir, violin, and dance from an early age, Mariama says she didn’t think of herself as an artist. “I just thought I was normal...My parents just thought art education was a natural thing that all children should have. Not because they ever expected us to become artists.”

### Fighting the Power

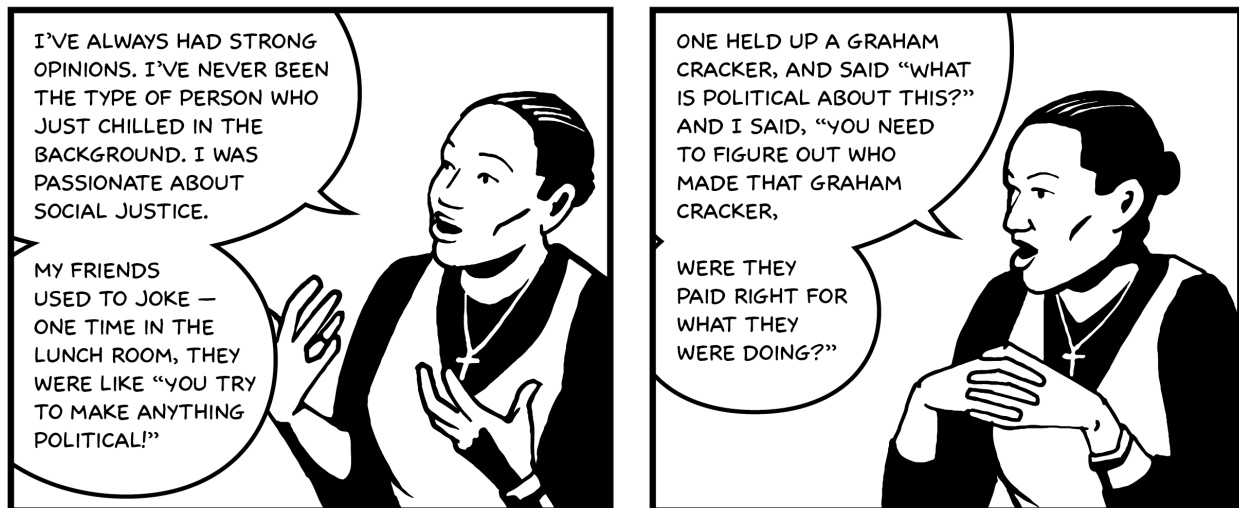
As she neared adolescence, Mariama’s sense of racial pride and community commitment was imbued with increased historical and critical analysis. The summer after eighth grade she went on a mission trip to Haiti with her Aunt (not by blood) to work at an orphanage.

I had a sense of “they’re Black, I’m Black, and I need to lift people up.”...But I didn’t have a political analysis as to why Haiti was in the situation that it is. So it was after I got back that I decided to write a paper on Haiti. And that’s when I learned about the US occupation, Duvalier, The French exacting debt on Haiti for freeing themselves from slavery...I was so angry...Haiti gave me that sense of the link between history and the current reality and that this country was not all about love and justice.

Not long before this, in 7th grade, Mariama had discovered hip-hop music, listening on a boom box gifted to her by her grandmother. This was around the end of the 1980’s, beginning of the 1990’s, when political rap was experiencing widespread popularity. Mariama’s interest in hip-hop dovetailed with her growing awareness of injustice:

I was in love with Public Enemy...I felt like they were saying what I wanted to say...It expressed the rage I was feeling about things that were happening and fear of my own neighborhood...I remember when F the Police [by NWA] came out and being like, “I kind of feel that too!”

Increasingly politicized, Mariama was very vocal about her ideas. Laughing a bit at her earnest and uncompromising teenage self, she explains:



But as Mariama moved through high school, the synergy between hip-hop and politics in her life began to shift. Mariama was developing a feminist perspective, in part spurred on by her mother who had begun to speak publically about the sexual abuse she had experienced as a child. Meanwhile hip-hop was becoming even more mainstream, and political rappers like Public Enemy and KRS-One were losing popularity to more commercial rappers.

I started feeling like the tide of hip-hop was turning towards a real misogynist form of music. So I was kind of like, “screw hip hop”...There had always been that strain [of misogyny] but it was like, “I’m going to listen to Queen Latifah, and then I’ll listen to MC Lite.” But Queen Latifah and MC Lite were not really



performing anymore. And there wasn't another strong female artist. So, hip-hop just felt like it wasn't speaking for me anymore. In fact it was speaking for and presenting things that I had a clear analysis about being against.

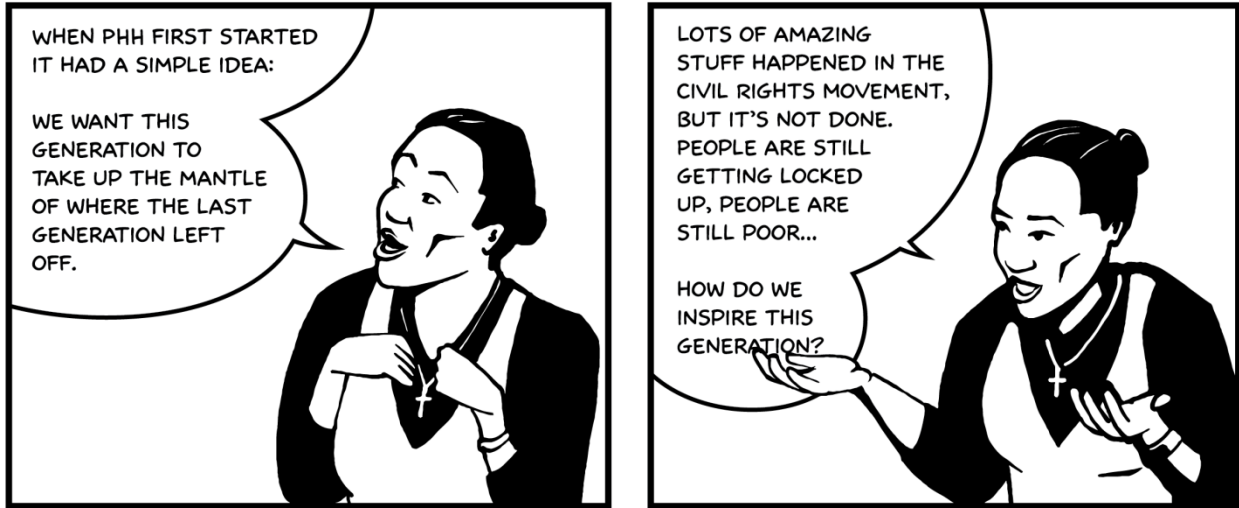
Mariama never fully stopped listening to rap, and it would come back into her life in a big way through Project HIP-HOP. But this clash had an effect:

When I was coming up it was a certain phase of hip-hop, everybody was a hip-hopper. Were they all good? Obviously not. But I remember beat boxing in front of the mirror and trying to figure out how to really do it as a female beat boxer. I never performed. That is one of my big actual regrets. That before I went on to start performing in hip-hop, I got into that place of being frustrated with it as an art form.

During high school, Mariama's major creative outlet was singing. She was a founding member of a new choir at her parents' church, where she found an important mentor.

Up until then I had been like really timid. My voice was really loud when I was talking or yelling, so I don't know why I had this falsetto, sad little voice...Sister Linda was the first person who really pushed me to sing. She was like, "If your voice is loud then your singing voice is loud too"...She would make me breathe in and push out the air from my stomach. "You need to sing from there." After that my voice became so big I couldn't control it...she was the first person that believed that I could sing.

Meanwhile, during the summer after her sophomore year of high school, Mariama joined Project HIP-HOP (PHH). At the time, PHH was a youth program of the Massachusetts American Civil Liberties Union that ran a "rolling classroom." Each summer a group of young people would travel through the south meeting civil rights veterans and visiting sites of historical significance. Upon returning to Boston, these same youth took up the role of spreading the knowledge they had gained. They presented about their trip in high school and college classrooms, spoke around the city, and put together a high school curriculum (Murray & Garrido, 1995).



For Mariama, this immersion in civil rights history hit home. She was able to see herself in this history — particularly as a young, politicized Black singer. She found herself thinking “Oh my gosh, I was just born during the wrong time! I would have totally been a freedom singer.” And while at her private school she often stood alone in her passion for politics, at PHH she made some of her first friends who were highly political as well. PHH Co-Founder Nancy Murray remembers young Mariama:

She was very, very articulate and much older than her years in one way...She was able to stand in front of an audience of up to 1000 in a ballroom and just be spellbinding. The way she operated, people were really in awe. It made her seem incredibly wise, though in another way she was 15 and 16. Perhaps it was her family tradition, being able to stand up in church...She was definitely leadership material.

Two years later the program took Mariama and her peers to South Africa. They were inspired by the determination and activism they saw, and also by the way that culture and art were omnipresent.

We were talking a lot about the style [of organizing] that we saw in South Africa. Which was incorporating art...You don't go anywhere in South Africa without music. It's just part of the way that people live.

Mariama began serving as a musical ambassador, sharing songs with the communities the group met. Then, when one of the youth connected with a South African rapper and recorded a song at a local studio, Mariama joined in as a singer. The song ended up on South African television:

South Africa, SA  
 What's going on with equality today?  
 And has apartheid really gone away?  
 Better yet hey yo is freedom here to stay (Murray, 1997).

## Diverging Paths

After high school, Mariama took off for Stanford. While her parents had attended college at the height of the radical left, Mariama faced a period of active disintegration of 1960's reforms. At neighboring UC Berkeley, ethnic studies were being dismantled and affirmative action was ending. Mariama and her classmates traveled to Berkeley to protest in solidarity with students there, and Mariama found herself arrested for the first time. Back at Stanford, she and her friends were organizing for racial equity in the tenure process.

She speaks excitedly as she describes for me the effort she was a part of her junior year to "take over" student government. She and other students who had been involved in social justice activism ran a slate of candidates and won, using their new positions to make change — like increasing resources for ethnic- and gender-based student centers.

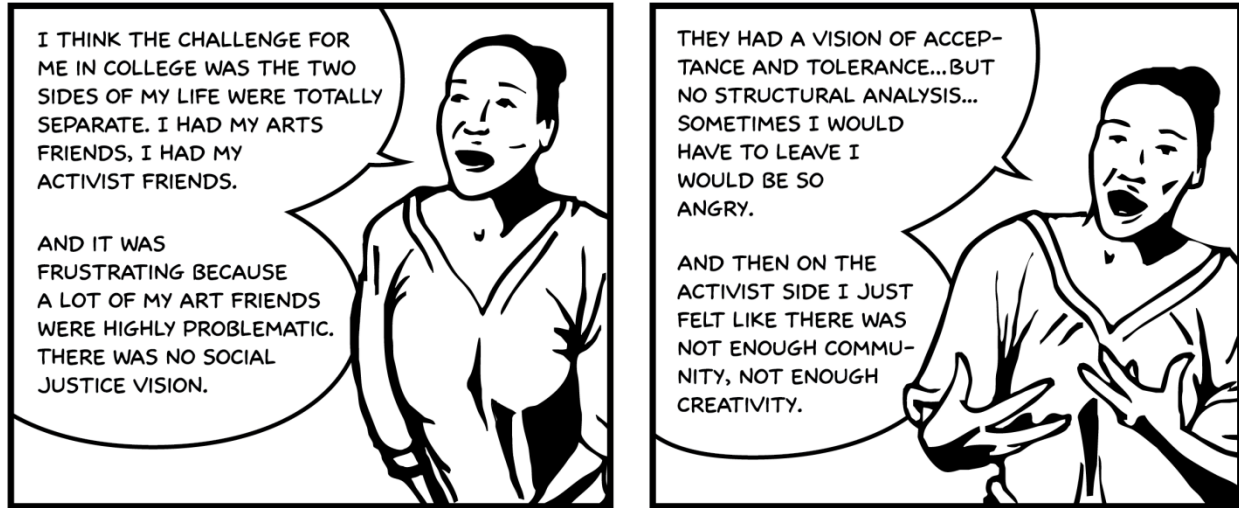
It was one of my first real experiences with the kind of strategic organizing that I wish was happening a lot more, where people really sit down and say, "Where is the system weak? Where can it be moved? How can we do it? And what does it take to really win?"

At the same time, Mariama carried on singing in college, where she briefly considered a professional career. She joined Everyday People, Stanford's "Hip-Hop, R&B, Motown, and Soul A Cappella Group." She says she was quite the diva. When she runs into people she went to college with, it is often her membership in Everyday People that they remember. Along the way, she did some dancing, but was slowed down by an injury.

At this point her activism and her arts were two very different pieces of her life: "two worlds." At times they directly conflicted.

There was one time I went to a protest, got arrested, got bailed out...went back and showered and had to be at the studio. And of course I lost most of my voice because they try to freeze you out in prison. So it hurt a little to sing.

But perhaps more profoundly, Mariama was faced at times with the challenge of reconciling the two worlds, each with its own ethos and culture.



Unlike the early church communities Mariama describes — based not only on shared faith but also on shared racial and historical experiences — the communities she found at college were largely interest-based. Students gathered around a particular activity: singing, dancing, or activism. This offered both benefits and challenges for Mariama. On the one hand, they promoted specialization and expertise — perhaps Mariama would not have become as well versed in organizing strategy without such a focused context. And such groups could potentially promote cross-cultural engagement. Mariama’s activist community was multi-racial, and her arts community was an accepting environment, for instance, in terms of diversity of sexuality. On the other hand, such communities were less deeply rooted in shared values, history, and worldview. And they incorporated more limited forms of expression — activists engaged in organizing, artists engaged in art. As Mariama puts it, “the good thing is you can go deep, but you also lose a lot.”

## Reunification

Upon leaving college, arts and activism were substantially separate pieces of Mariama’s life. But they were connected, of course, through Mariama herself. And she had an urge to reintegrate. The vehicle for of this reintegration would be Project HIP-HOP. She and her peers had remained connected to the organization through college. Then, in 2000, just around the time when Mariama was graduating from Stanford, PHH decided to split off from the ACLU and to become its own non-profit. Mariama was asked to be the new executive director. She agreed to do it — for two years.

The fledgling organization got off to an extremely rocky start, with a major loss of funding after 9/11 and interpersonal problems between Mariama and another staff member. Funding was a constant issue, and Mariama was always hustling to keep the organization going. For a number of years she was the only staff member. She went on and off being paid, moved in with her parents for a while, and at one point gave blood to a research study in order to raise \$150 for the organization. But in the context of civil rights history, these didn’t seem like huge sacrifices to her.

I'm not doing anything close to what people in the past have done for this work. I don't have to call every day so that you know that I am not dead. People have given way more. What we consider sacrifice is not comparable.

During Mariama's tenure, PHH experimented with a few different organizing models, and tackled a range of community issues. In part, these changes were the result of Mariama's urge to be always improving. She tells me, "One of the things I love about PHH is that we keep trying to figure out how to do it better and take it to the next level." In the words of Najma Nazyat, a fellow youth organizer, "Mariama is a visionary. She's always way ahead of herself and everybody else...she's never satisfied." Still inspired by the arts-infused organizing they had seen in South Africa, she and her colleagues worked to combine direct organizing and artistic work. At times, the group would find synergy between hip-hop and organizing. Around 2004 to 2006, Mariama says:

It was beautiful. We had a magazine that was using hip-hop, and we started talking about what is real hip-hop and having some debates around it...every small group that we had was hip-hop oriented. Like, hip-hop was central to the work, not just as an aesthetic. I mean it was a big.

At other times, the organization mimicked the split Mariama had experienced during college — two worlds, so close but not quite united. On the one hand they fought for funding for youth jobs with other youth organizing groups in the Boston area. On the other they ran open mics and poetry cyphers. Youth who joined the organization chose a "track" — they were there for organizing, or for arts.

Starting in 2009, PHH went through a strategic planning process. They acknowledged the tensions of working in both arts and organizing: in particular, the fact that it is difficult for such a small organization to be excellent at both. Somewhere along the way — nobody remembers quite when — Mariama discovered the concept of cultural organizing. This concept offered a new frame through which PHH could refocus its intersectional work.

Using a cultural organizing frame, Project HIP-HOP now works to bring art and culture together with social justice organizing in all aspects of the organization. Internally, the group supports consciousness raising through the analysis of hip-hop lyrics and social issues; and fosters healing through the techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed. Externally, the group challenges deficit narratives about youth and communities of color through poetry, song, and hip-hop street theater. The group sees itself as specialists of a sort, serving as the "cultural wing" of a growing multi-generational movement for social justice. In the spring of 2012, for example, they join the Youth Way on the MBTA coalition, fighting to stop drastic fare increases on public transportation. While other groups focus on more traditional organizing tactics, PHH is helping the coalition to develop chants, and creating guerilla street theater for actions. During a youth rally outside the city's Transportation building, PHH artists emerge from the crowd with a short play framing the struggle for transportation money within the larger discourse about the concentration of wealth among the "1%". Protesters join in as the youth chant, "Make no money, breakin' our pockets, takin' our change, and we gonna stop it!"

The cultural organizing model being developed by PHH seems more reminiscent of Mariama's experiences in the AME Church than the more formal activism of her later years. She and her colleagues are creating a space that fosters community not just around interests, but

around a shared history and culture. In some ways this shared culture already exists — most youth enter the organization identifying with hip-hop culture and with their Boston neighborhoods. In other ways, the group is building a renewed sense of shared history. The organizing model also resonates with Mariama’s experiences outside the US. In both South Africa and, later, Brazil, Mariama found cultural contexts where walls between art and organizing had not been constructed so firmly: “They didn’t think of it as anything special to be including arts in their organizing. Art is a part of people’s lives, so it’s inherently part of their organizing.” PHH is still, as Mariama’s father might say, a “work in progress.” But it is also kind of space Mariama would have wanted to find when she was young.

### Conclusion: Living In-Between



MARIAMA DOING PAPERWORK AT A DESK  
IN THE MAIN PHH SPACE.

In March 2012, I go by PHH’s space to attend that night’s board meeting. In the large open room PHH occupies — which serves as office, lounge, practice space, and performance space all in one — Farai, the artistic director, is working with a group of youth, staff, and alums to rehearse their most recent piece. The musical performance is entitled “Breathe,” and touches on both the economic and environmental effects of wealth concentration. Mariama enters the room with newly dyed blond hair — the newest in a stream of hair rearrangements. We head down the hall, to talk in her office.

I ask her about the work they’ve been doing with the Youth Way coalition. True to form, Mariama is unsatisfied. Just a few months into a new method of structuring their organizing, Mariama is already envisioning how it could be better — how it could truly become the kind of

cultural organizing she dreams of. The more she works in this arena, the more she uncovers new tensions between the work of arts and the work of organizing. One tension relates to the drastically different timelines that artists and organizers are used to. While artists tend to have set performance dates, or continue working until a piece is polished, organizers often need to react quickly to changing political contexts. Another tension has to do with balancing aesthetic goals and political goals in art making. But Mariama sees these tensions as ultimately generative:

Is the goal to create the highest form of art? Is the goal to move the organizing forward? To me the transformation sits in-between them, and that means that we are going to live at the tension that’s in-between.

Mariama is in a bit of an in-between space herself. After nineteen years with PHH, and almost twelve at its helm, Mariama is making plans to leave the organization. She is enrolling in divinity school in the fall of 2013, and has begun the search for a new Executive Director. She wants to use graduate school as a time to “find her voice.” Rather than supporting young artists,

she will be figuring out “what I would like to be putting out into the world.” She also hopes to make more time for her own artistic practice. “I want to be able to do my stuff again. It’s hard to do that when so much of my job is administrative...I love writing poetry, I love singing, I love these things that I think are more of the creative side of who I am.” These days she identifies herself as a cultural organizer, and continues the work of integrating the various parts of herself. After all, she says, they are all connected.

My love of the [Black and Latino] diaspora, my love of art and creation, and my desire for activism — they come from the same place in my soul. They all come from this belief that there is a better a way to live.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this article I use the term “organizing” to refer to a range of efforts that seek social justice outcomes through collective action, with a focus on building power among marginalized groups. Included in this definition are the overlapping fields of community organizing (Warren & Mapp, 2011), youth organizing (LISTEN, Inc., 2002), union organizing, and social movement organizing.

<sup>2</sup> The font used in the comic frames is CCScottmcloud, by Comicraft. All images: Copyright Paul J. Kuttner, 2013.

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