

“The Role of Allies in 2010”

Keynote Address Presented by  
Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, Ph.D.

Director, The John L. Warfield Center for African and  
African American Studies

Associate Professor, Department of Theatre and Dance  
at the

Women’s and Gender Studies Graduate Student Conference and  
Abriendo Brecha Activist Conference

University of Texas at Austin

19 February 2010

Thank you, Sue Heinzelman for inviting me to speak at this important conference, where graduate students have an opportunity to explore ideas related to gender.

Thank you, Michelle Mott for providing me with all of the necessary details about this keynote address.

One of the important items that Michelle shared with me was the length of this speech. She said I had an hour to share my ideas. Sue, however, assured me that 30 minutes would work just fine.

Trust me, I’m going with Sue’s suggestion! This will give you ample opportunity to make your way to the next session which begins at 1:45.

I have entitled my talk “The Role of Allies in 2010.”

I take this opportunity to speak with you very seriously. The times require that I use every moment of public presentation to speak the

truth as I know it. That is my job as an artist, a scholar, a teacher, a committed human being seeking to make a world of peace and justice for everyone.

This truth telling is dangerous business. It leaves one vulnerable—but our vulnerability is our strength. It leaves one exposed, but exposure allows the wind to whip through all those dank and musty spaces of terror and blow away isolation and fear. Truth telling leaves us free—and that is, after all the point.

This truth telling is especially dangerous for a Black queer woman, for me. My very safety is at stake when I speak the truth, the truth of my life, and the truth of the world as I know it. My truths challenge the very foundation of the systems around me, systems that variously support and denigrate me, systems that applaud and slap me.

So, as I walk, I look for mirrors, for allies who are also committed to everyone's freedom, allies willing to risk their own safety in order to insure mine.

As I consider the seriousness of the moment, I am reminded of the courage and power of actress Beah Richards who was invited to speak before the Chicago Peace Congress in 1951. You know Beah Richards as Sidney Poitier's mother in "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner." She was also the preacher in the groves in the film "Beloved" and the subject of a biographical documentary by Lisa Gay Hamilton. As scholar Margaret Wilkerson describes Richards' presentation, the women—all of them white—who invited Richards to speak wanted her to address racial diversity. Instead of performing the role of the grateful colored guest, instead of trotting out a poem by Georgia Douglas Johnson or Paul Laurence Dunbar—Beah Richards confronted the issue of racial diversity head on in a piece she wrote especially for the occasion

entitled “A Black Woman Speaks.” In this poetic direct address to her all-white largely female audience, she said—

“They said, the white supremacists said,  
that you were better than me  
that your fair brow should never know the sweat of slavery.  
They lied.  
White womanhood too is enslaved.  
The difference is degree.

And what wrongs you, murders me.  
And eventually marks your grave  
So we share a mutual death at the hand of tyranny.

He, the white supremacist, fixed your minds with poisonous  
thought—  
‘white skin is supreme.’  
Set your minds on my slavery  
the better to endure your own.

Cuddled down in your pink slavery  
and thought somehow my wasted blood  
confirmed your superiority.

Because your necklace was of gold  
You did not notice that it throttled speech.”

That was Beah Richards in 1951 who sought to join in solidarity with white women even as she acknowledged the ways in which the lives of Black women and white women were sharply divided.

Some 28 years later, poet activist Audre Lorde was similarly invited to speak at a conference—the Second Sex Conference in New York City. Like Richards, Audre Lorde spoke of the challenge and necessity of building allies. She stated—

“As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define

the master's house as their only source of support.

In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower.”

So, in the spirit of Richards who exposed the trap of “pink slavery” in order to forge allies, and Lorde who told us that we must not replicate the very structures that divide us, I offer some reflections on what it means to be an ally to queer people, to women, and to people of color. And you are going to help me with this part of this address.

## Rule #1

Allies know that it is not sufficient to be liberal. The liberal position allows those with optimal privileges to pretend that everything is “basically OK.” Believing that things are “OK” means a deep mistrust of the truths that people of color, women, queer people and poor people bring to light. The liberal position says that those of us with legitimate observations about injustice are really exaggerating, paranoid, and unwilling to see how we are creating the problem we expose. In this way the liberal position is actually a walk backwards, because it creates suspicion among the very people who might be allies. The politically liberal position is the hegemonic force of the academy and carries with it all of the numbing characteristics of any hegemonic force. Hegemony blinds us to what is hiding in plain sight. The liberal position supports the status quo of the academy which means that racism, sexism, homophobia, the perils of nationhood, and a commitment

to class structures cannot be undone in the academy—unless we move toward a radical rather than liberal position.

This first rule reminds me of the powerful ideas of scholar Joy James who makes a critical distinction between a soldier and a warrior. The soldier works for the state—and therefore supports all that that implies. The warrior works for freedom. Allies must be willing to be warriors, and risk the support of institutions in our joint move toward deep liberation.

### Rule #2

Be loud and crazy so Black folks won't have to be! Speak up! Say it! Name it! If you are male, YOU be the one to tell your department chair that the women's salaries in your department must be brought line with those of the men. If you are white, YOU be the one to advocate for the qualified grad student of color applicant over the qualified white grad student applicant. If you are straight, YOU be the one to attend the President's speech tomorrow at 9:00 am when he speaks about partner benefits at the University of Texas. If you are Christian, YOU be the one to be sure that Muslim students have safe accessible places on campus for their obligatory 5 times per day prayers. This does not mean being wreckless, strategizing is always important (as we will see in the next rule). Speaking up does mean being willing to relinquish some piece of privilege in order to create justice. Allies step up, they do the work that has left others depleted and weary.

### Rule #3

Do not tell anyone in any oppressed group to be patient. Doing so is a sign of your own privilege and unconscious though absolute disregard for the person with whom you are speaking. Remember, it was a number of white ministers in Atlanta who advised Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. to be patient in reacting to U.S. racism.

This call for patience prompted Kings' "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." King wrote—

“We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see . . . that "justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

Patience is not a political strategy. It is a diversionary tactic. It is a patronizing recommendation made only by those who do not believe that oppression is killing us all.

Do you think that UT has doubled the number of Black faculty on campus since 2001 because we all waited for departments to see the light? If your answer is yes, then you are in need of very serious ally training.

Planning while appearing to wait, is a strategy. Allies, plan with us. And I won't say anymore because it would undermine the strategizing that is taking place while I am delivering this speech.

Rule #4

Recognize the new racism, the new sexism, the old homophobia. It is institutional and structural. Learn to walk in a room and count the people of color—and know what you know. The absence of people of color in any space cannot be accounted for by chance or accident. Learn to see how many women are in charge. The

absence of powerful women in any space cannot be accounted for by chance or accident. Learn to see and feel those spaces that are unsafe for queer people. The absence of queer people in any space cannot be accounted for by chance or accident. Allies know that racism, sexism, and homophobia are real and NEVER tell people, “You could be wrong, you know.” Such a statement presumes that you have greater insights than those with lived experience inside of multiple oppressions. Recognizing the new racism, the new sexism, the old homophobia means listening, means acknowledging that these oppressions have not been honestly talked about enough. Playwright and novelist Pearl Cleage demands that theatre be her “hollering place” — a space where Black women can tell their stories. In her “hollering place,” everyone is welcome IF they are willing to truly listen to Black women and feel with the density of our lives. Feeling with the person to whom you are speaking, means NOT offering an objection to the gashes of racism or sexism or homophobia that she or he has shared with you—even if holding onto your objection leaves your tongue bloody! In 48 hours, after contemplation and reflection, after those experiences have had a chance to germinate in your experience, you just might feel inside rather than outside of that person’s experience. Allies know how to spot oppression and to support others as they reveal their wounds.

## Rule #5

When called out about your racism, sexism or homophobia, don’t cower in embarrassment, don’t cry, and don’t silently think “she’s crazy” and vow never to interact with her again. We are all plagued by racism, sexism, and homophobia. Be grateful that someone took the time to expose yours—remember, exposure allows the wind to whip away isolation and fear. Exposure is a step toward freedom. Allies welcome an opportunity to see how their choices, ideas, words may be erasing those around them. It’s not about your intent—that you did not intend to be sexist when

you consulted with men rather than with women even though the women were in charge—it is about the effect—the damaging effect your choice had on others, the reinforcement of patriarchy that your choice made. Allies want to know when they have been contributed to the very oppressions they oppose. Allies know they are not above reproach.

## Rule #6

Allies actively support alternative possibilities. Some of us publish in nationally recognized journals our departments do not know or respect. Some of us write in poetic or non-standard or elliptical styles as a matter of choice, not ignorance. Some of us paint our truths rather than write them. Some of us teach with a loose map. Because allies believe “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” allies consider the transgressive power in alternative academic strategies, a power that works to undo patriarchy, white supremacy, the insatiability of capitalism, and heterosexism. Supporting alternative possibilities is the only way we can all dream ourselves into the world in which we want to live.

As I consider the ideas that I have shared with you, it is clear that if we examine the powerful conclusion set forth by the Combahee River Collective, we will address each of the six ally rules I have presented today. This radical collective of Black lesbians wrote—

“If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”

This list of rules for allies requires that each of us know when we are in that role, those of us who are women, those of us who are queer, those of us who are people of color must examine those

times when our privileges insist that we abide by these very rules. For me, my class privilege and nationality are markers that position me in the role of ally. While at UT I often seek out mirrors—those persons willing to take on racism, sexism, homophobia—I also must practice these six rules in many other arenas. This means that the rules for allies can be used by everyone in this room.

The practice of these rules means that more and more of us have the space to fully be ourselves because we will speak our truth with assurance of support.

Ntozake Shange's groundbreaking choreopoem opened on Broadway in 1976. The piece opens with the lady in brown speaking to the audience:

Dark phrases of womanhood  
of never having been a girl  
half notes scattered  
without rhythm/no tune  
distraught laughter fallin  
over a black girl's shoulder  
it's funny/ it's hysterical  
they melody-less-ness of her dance  
don't tell nobody don't tell a soul  
she's dancin on beer cans and shingles

this must be the spook house  
another song with no singers  
lyrics/no voices  
& interrupted solos  
unseen performances

are we ghouls?  
children of horror

the joke?

somebody/anybody  
sing a black girl's song  
bring her out  
to know herself  
to know you  
but sing her rhythms  
carin/struggle/hard times

sing her song of life  
she's been dead so long closed in silence so long  
she doesn't know the sound  
of her own voice  
her infinite beauty  
she's half-notes scattered  
without rhythm/no tune  
sing her sighs  
sing the song of her possibilities  
sing a righteous gospel  
the makin of a melody  
let her be born  
let her be born  
& handled warmly.

Now, I'd like you to explore these rules among yourselves. Talk with your neighbor at your table. Discuss which of the six rules you find the most challenging. Be specific. The rules are: 1) Liberal is not Sufficient, 2) Be Loud and Crazy, 3) Patience is not a Political Strategy, 4) Recognize the new racism, the new sexism, the old homophobia, 5) Welcome Opportunities to Examine Your Racism, Sexism, Homophobia, and 6) Support Alternative Possibilities.

You have about 5 minutes for this discussion.

(Time elapses.)

Now, who found #1 a challenge? (Go through all six rules allowing the group to examine each.)

Sharon Bridgforth's *delta dandi* ends with a both a declaration of personal freedom and a call for community. It seems a fitting way for me to conclude.

“this is where it all comes together.  
this is where we meet. the shift is now.  
the Change has come. it is time.  
i move from the crossroads  
stand where all the rivers meet.

life flows through me.  
i wait for you.  
come to me.

ask your question child.”

As you move through the rest of the conference, join with others as allies in order to ensure our mutual freedom.