

KEESHA GASKINS-NATHAN SPEECH

NASPAA - 15 October 2020

"BUILDING THE NEW CIVIC SQUARE"

Thank you for the invitation to share some thoughts with you all today. I would like to start with an orientation to our work within our portfolio at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. And then I would like to talk about the historical markers for where we are, grounded in a contemporary context. Then I will move on to the conference theme, talk about the scope and dimensions of a civic square, and finally round it out with the role of institutions as designers, participants, and listeners in building the new Civic Square.

I want to start with the Rockefeller Brothers Fund orientation to this work. We have a *Democratic Practice* program, not simply Democracy. We operate at the intersection of democratic systems and democratic culture. And that is how different systems of our democracy intersect with the culture of our practice to create the praxis of democracy. I operate with a partner who focuses on global challenges, and my portfolio focuses on the United States.

I thought deeply first about the moment in time where we sit, and a big part of that, of course, is the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage. The 19th Amendment became law in August 1920, when 26 million adult female Americans were nominally eligible to vote at that time. But it wasn't for everyone. What we do know is that American-born Native women gained citizenship with the Snyder Act in 1924. But as late as 1962, individual states still prevented Native women from voting. Asian Americans had citizenship in 1920. But first generation Asian Americans did not. Asian American immigrant women were therefore excluded from voting until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. And in Puerto Rico, women's voting rights were first given to literate women in 1929, and then extended to all Puerto Rican women in 1935. The struggle for suffrage for Black women began in the United States in the 1800s, but continued until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

I share that not to minimize the importance of the 19th Amendment, but just to express how important the Civic Square has been in evolving rights and access to justice for everyone. As we sit in the contemporary context, we have the coronavirus pandemic, racial justice uprisings in response to systemic police violence and systemic racism, the digital reshaping of our public discourse, the role of media, social media and disinformation—and, we are in the midst of the most contentious and consequential presidential elections in this nation's history. Both the political markers and contemporary contexts embody the understanding about how all Americans experience democracy, justice, economic opportunity, and freedom, and how these concepts were also, while often universally expressed, not universally experienced.

I would now like to turn more directly to the theme of the conference: building the new Civic Square. When I first thought about it, I found it impossible not to think of it as a physical space, and the anachronistic idea of a person with a megaphone and a pamphlet, speaking their piece about the state and condition of the world and our place in it. Then I started thinking about the current public conversation and political actions about monuments, these focal points within our physical public spaces and how that public conversation relates to the redesign of our civic square. Monuments are a physical manifestation of the public narratives we tell ourselves about our society, *plus* the artistic culture at the time of creation, *plus* the politics related to what we seek to memorialize. So the monument is narrative, plus culture, plus politics, meeting in a physical manifestation. When we think about how we create our public square and about our

current national crisis around what we memorialize, as relates to concepts of colonialism and slavery throughout our nation's history, we are obviously recognizing we can't segregate Christopher Columbus from genocidal slaughter, or Confederate soldiers from the fight to retain race-based slavery as a right of southern states. It makes sense that, as so many seek to change our public narrative, that we also seek to change and refine the monuments that we recognize.

What does it mean, then, to recreate and redefine the public square in light of changing technology, new narratives, changing who defines the culture and politics about what we seek to memorialize? What about the very nature of physical memorials? What does it mean to have literal representations of people? Do we want new representations of people? Does that capture an appropriate narrative? What about abstract representations of ideas or principles, modern art that doesn't necessarily display any one or single thing, but tells us something much bigger? What about nothing at all? They're just different ways to think about how we use physical manifestations, to memorialize what's important to us as a society and as a culture. Before I completely work this metaphor beyond its utility, how do we consider the idea of remaking the public square from public demand beyond elite design? --which is sort of where monuments kept us.

So, what is the Civic Square? What is the Civic Square, *really*? And how do we design one for the 21st Century, larger than the sort of *physical* public square I alluded to. It includes both concepts and action, principles and engagement. It rests in the narrative we tell ourselves about the politics of the day, and the culture of our democratic engagement, and includes our formal democratic systems, the actual physical spaces and their connection to civic engagement, digital spaces and engaging with informal spaces. It is formal engagement through democratic processes in every formation in between, where people come together to advance individual or collective ideas, to express our political thoughts. To be meaningful, we can't divorce civic engagement from power. We can't think we have a civic life without political consequences.

Indeed, where we seek to alienate civic life from political power, we reject the ability for those to advance ideas of equity and fairness. Like the Native, immigrant, Territorial, and Black women, who fought for years beyond the nominal extension of the vote to women, we must now consider whom we disengage when we suggest that the Civic Square is a neutral space, where we all come to be heard equally. If that is something we desire, it must be built in and embedded in the design from the beginning.

The systems of our democracy as they rest today were designed for a much smaller country with a homogeneous population, limited suffrage and agrarian economy, that accepted gender-based exclusion from the ability to exercise and hold basic rights, and in a country that accepted the fundamental economic dependence on the institution of slavery. Do those same systems work for a much larger country with a more diverse population in every sense? And for one with nearly universal suffrage and a largely financialized and increasingly tech dependent economy, where we are rejecting notions of inherent dominance by any population, and redefining notions of normativity that need not be based on Whiteness? So we do have to question the formal systems. As we talk about civic engagement, let us discuss how this actually manifests itself. We certainly have formal systems of governance to which I alluded: voting town halls, participatory budgeting, political parties, and we have informal systems of participation: community gardens, community groups, youth groups, fraternal organizations. They both implicate informal and formal civil society institutions, but they do not well define the scope of political influence. Indeed, in a town where decisions are made by elites over coffee in a diner, or in a city where they are made in a private dining room, even an election to decide who sits on

the city council may have less power in deciding a development plan, and may dwarf a strong mayor-weak council political structure, even in a landslide election.

So civic engagement rests in a whole set of institutions, both formal and informal. And these formal and informal institutions do not necessarily have a correlation to political power, political influence or political culture. Many informal institutions have a very strong political culture and the ability to engage strong communications and shared decision-making: community organizations, social media networks, online distributed multimodal identity groups, community networks, garden cleanup groups, informal food banks, worker and food cooperatives, mutual aid groups, and emancipatory education coalitions. These groups tend to have a very strong political internal culture. And yet, we have a lot of formal institutions with a weak political culture: strong hierarchical systems, top down management, schools and postsecondary education, philanthropy, think tanks, NGOs, and faith communities. How do these entities engage with each other, having engaged through each other?

We can't necessarily assume simply engaging in formal institutions actually yields more political power-- that informal institutions are less politically valid. How people feel and express themselves, how they voluntarily organize themselves are all incredibly important. NASPAA's Twitter feed reflects strong values here, with lots of encouragement for voting, and becoming poll workers, and engaging in public speech. Yet we have some challenges regarding how these systems actually connect to the reality of how our governance operates.

Does it make sense to tell people to vote when we know from research from Northwestern University, from Demos, and other places, that politicians respond more quickly and reliably to political and economic elites with distinct differences in policy preferences, and that the oligarchical trend of our democracy is increasing? What does it mean to have deep declines in small businesses, mid-level jobs, entry-level jobs, and local and state budgets on the verge of collapse, while people are informed every day that we have a very strong economy because the stock market and banks are performing better and better?

In my opinion, we have experienced a collective cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is when two actions or ideas are not psychologically consistent. People do everything in their power to change them until they become consistent. The discomfort is triggered by a belief clashing with new information. We try and find a way to resolve the contradiction, to reduce the internal discomfort of these ideas clashing with each other, and we try to resolve them in a way that makes sense to us. We are constantly getting new information. We are in a situation and what's best for the economy is not necessarily what's best for the people. If the economy is strong, how can we have, as the National Low Income Housing Coalition reports, 30 to 40 million people currently at risk for foreclosure?

How do we recognize issues of equity and justice as the country becomes increasingly aware of the systemic police violence and racial inequities that Black and Brown communities have been aware of for so long? How does our civic square hold the ability for American residents, workers, citizens and friends with connected and related economies around the world, connected related movement infrastructure, to reconcile this cognitive dissonance? How does the Civic Square allow us to arrive at shared conclusions or different conclusions? Importantly, where does the ability to listen reside? How do people hear wide perspectives, varying views, different experiences, new stories from people experiencing the same conditions yet in different ways, and in what ways is the ability to *listen*, a structural challenge versus a condition of choice? According to the Pew Research Center, 62% of adults in the United States get their

news from social media, as well as another three quarters who say they get their news from email or social media site updates. Pew further found that those who relied mostly on social media for political news stand apart from other news consumers in a number of ways. First, these adults tend to be less likely than other news consumers to follow major news stories, such as a coronavirus outbreak and the 2020 presidential election. And perhaps tied to that, this group also tends to be less knowledgeable about these topics.

As we think about what these news trends mean, according to the [Center of Humane Technology](#), social media companies are under immense pressure to prioritize engagement and growth. Consequently, technology platforms have created a race for human attention that manifests real harms to our society that is built into their business model. These platforms have business models that promote misinformation. We know that fake news spreads six times faster than legitimate news sources, has negative impacts on cognition and memory (including loss of ability around memory and focus), negatively affects physical and mental health (and amplifies stress), increases loneliness and risky health behaviors. Fake news also has a negative impact on human relationships, through less empathy and more misunderstandings, and through the application of sexism, racism, ableism, and homophobia to double down on systemic oppression. It impacts our political discourse by elevating propaganda, distorting dialogue, providing misinformation, and ultimately, contributing to a disrupted election process.

These impacts are impacts of *design*, not by choice of the users. So as we think about solutions, it is not always enough to simply say, hey, let's develop a plan where people can choose to come together, or we are going to have these solutions that are individual, not systemic. When we seek solutions to systemic problems that have solely an individual application, we have to recognize that we are not addressing the systemic pieces. And so, we must also ask, what are the *systemic* relationships related to the Civic Square?

And finally, I would like to speak to the role of institutions and creating the new Civic Square. What does this moment demand of the responsibility of those who shape civil society institutions? What are the obligations of these institutions to look internally as they seek to build for the greater society, beyond understanding how these spaces we've talked about connect together? And how do we train and prepare participants for their role in the new Civic Square? What about the institutions themselves? What is a larger role in addressing their own internal frameworks within these institutions such that their inputs, their creativity, their innovation can have a broader and more effective impact? What are the implications of leadership, listening, power, and governance? What are we prepared to hear? What mistakes are we prepared to make? Despite our best efforts, are we prepared to learn about how much of our beliefs and assumptions are based on mis-stereotypes and antiquated thinking-- particularly in the global North, but everywhere it presents itself? Are we prepared to confront the hallmarks of colonialism that control how our systems operate?

Before we dive into this question of colonialism, I want to distinguish this from the important work of DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion): the ability to have leadership and decision-making bodies reflect the values and people of the communities where the institution seek to operate and influence. We measure that through blood diversity measures, and the ability to be successful in this space is frankly a minimum standard for the 21st Century. Absent achieving these goals, an institution cannot adequately interrogate its ideas, policies, practices and curriculum in a context where it seeks to operate. DEI measures are not an end goal, but an essential minimum standard that must be met for an institution to be effective to meet its own mission. As we turn back to the hallmarks of colonialism, how do we think about how colonialism manifests itself in our institutions and the steps to change it.

When I thought about what colonialism means in a contemporary context, I saw this quote in a *Guardian* opinion piece from [Nemonte Nenquimoa](#), a Waorani leader from the Amazon rainforest. And this is what she says: “You forced your civilization upon us. And now look where we are: global pandemic, climate crisis, species extinction, and driving it all, widespread spiritual poverty. And all these years of taking, taking, taking from our lands, you have not had the courage or the curiosity, or the respect to get to know us. To understand how we see and think and feel, and what we know about life on this earth.” It was an amazingly powerful piece, but I thought that was a really important quote, to get us to think about the implications, as we think about colonialism in terms of what we do, how we sit and how we operate today. To give ourselves a space for curiosity, and innovation and indeed courage, we must consider how the same colonial tendencies impact how our institutions operate, the hallmarks of colonialism, extractive and exploitive treatment of resources and labor, racist and sexist treatment of people in limiting their access to power. Strict hierarchical power structures, and caste are subaltern frameworks supporting fundamental paradigms that provide fixed and embedded rankings of human value. That sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of all other groups on the basis of ancestry, and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract, but are ascribed essential meaning in a hierarchy favoring the dominant caste.

So when we talk about the key changes, we have to think about how we institutionalize fair and shared approaches to treatment of resources and labor, treat all people equitably regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation, and, importantly, reject caste or subaltern group paradigms or *any* structural framework based upon immutable characteristics (or pseudo-neutral proxies of the same) and assumptions about qualifications, relationships, and compensation. Where will we put our risk capital? And how expansively do we think about capital? Not just financial, but political, and reputational. How will our institutions think about what is innovative? Where will they provide space for ideation and creativity? And when will we interrogate our assumptions about what is risky? Are ideas from Black and Brown academics inherently riskier? Do creative leaps from women present greater risks than creative leaps from men? And as we look systemically at opportunities granted and denied, are we really talking about risk, or a new way of framing racism and sexism for an innovation age? And while all these questions are challenging, I think most importantly, it is exciting. What we can build is without bounds or limits. When I look at our educational institutions, our philanthropic institutions, when I look at these spaces, we have missions of great vision and expansiveness. We have the intention of building a great world where we operate in deep relationship with our brothers and sisters across nations' borders everywhere.

As we look at number 16 of the UN sustainable development goals to promote peace and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels-- the DNA to do that is already here. The DNA of the next phase of the public square is here, yet the metamorphosis is not complete. When we see a caterpillar and a butterfly, it is not immediately apparent that these creatures have the same DNA that they are of the same creature-- but they are. Yet the butterfly operates very differently. It ambulates differently, it looks different, it consumes different food, it spans thousands of miles as part of its territory. We must accept the fact that the DNA of respective missions permits changed institutions that can be very different, look very different, operate very differently, but still reach the same goals; Indeed, to reach broader goals with a greater reach, more diverse participants, and more fair outcomes, to support a fair, interdependent, sustainable, and healthy world. Thank you.