

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Lauren Ruffin responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
Seattle University · 7/25/26

Lauren Ruffin, the fourth Rolling Speaker Series contributor, responds from Seattle, building on Calida Jones, Dr. Lee Bynum, and Dr. Heather Gordon. She opens with a brief word on her own approach before her remarks. Lauren Ruffin uses she/her pronouns.



The Prompt

Throughout history, artists and cultural experiences have been our lighthouses - cutting through deep darkness, revealing truth, illuminating futures we couldn't yet name.

That light has never belonged to one person. A lighthouse is an ecosystem. It takes builders and visionaries to design it. Fuel to keep it alive. People willing to tend it in the harshest conditions. Smaller lights - lanterns, flashlights - to reach what the largest beams can't. And a culture of navigators who know how to recognize light, trust it, and move by it.

So what happens when we look at our cultural landscape this way? Who are the builders, the keepers, the fuel, the travelers? What are we actually sustaining, and what are we letting go dark? And what would it take for each of us to think differently about our roles, act differently within them, and together illuminate a future that is alive, responsive, and always becoming?

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The Response



Lauren Ruffin - Rolling Speaker Series - Speaker #4

I should preface this by saying I never talk this long. As a lecturer, I don't lecture - I ask questions - so I may need a few breathing and water breaks, because this is an endurance sport. Thank you, Calida and Doug, for bringing us together; and thank you, Calida, for your remarks, and Dr. Bynum and Dr. Gordon for theirs. I'll do my best to build on their thoughts.

My background begins with a political science degree earned at the turn of the century - I love saying that to freak people out - followed by a law degree, and then a mid-career pivot into arts and culture, storytelling, and technology. For the past few years I've been teaching worldbuilding and visualizing futures at Arizona State University, thinking a lot about what comes next and how we make whatever that is better.

This conversation on lighthouses came into my life at a particularly tender patch, when I'm reflecting on pretty much everything. My father died at the end of April. I don't know that I'd describe him as a lighthouse in my life, because our relationship was, and continues to be, complicated - but he was one of the few people I could drive cross-country with without a single disagreement or moment of annoyance. He was a really funny guy, and he was absolutely my best friend, even if we fussed a fair amount, because we're so similar.

This also comes as I'm likely to transition out of the arts sector in the coming months, for many of the reasons my colleagues outlined. Yes, we work our staff to exhaustion. Yes, there's mission drift. Working within a board structure is increasingly difficult, where the mission often feels less tangible and urgent than it does ego-driven. I will miss the beauty and intelligence of this work and the people who do it, even if it often frustrates me how those traits distract from how little true change we're making.

So many of these problems arise because of the unique systemic space the arts occupy. I was trying to think of another public sector with less regulation and oversight than arts institutions. Maybe churches?

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I spent the first part of my career working in heavily regulated spaces. I was a government affairs professional - which, despite popular opinion, has a ton of rules to follow - and then I transitioned into nonprofit fundraising. Most of my work as a fundraiser was in support of pretty deep human-services missions: working with unhoused families, teenage mothers, foster children, and food pantries in Washington, DC. The urgency of those missions put our work in stark relief. We knew that if we didn't do certain things, families would lose their homes, or kids would end up with parents who didn't appreciate them or treat them as they deserved.

Almost exactly ten years ago, when I started working at Fractured Atlas, my first large meeting was convened by a well-known foundation. They brought together maybe 50 to 60 leading researchers, program officers, and nonprofit executives to review research they'd done on artists' health and well-being. They shared data showing that, after the Affordable Care Act was passed, every demographic of artists was suffering. They didn't have health insurance, they qualified for food stamps, they had a hard time obtaining housing, and they suffered from a myriad of emotional and mental-health problems. The one outlier was married white women.

Essentially, in the arts, as everywhere else, where communities of color and people without access to wealth were suffering, married white women in particular tended to do better than everyone else, because they had a safety net to fall back on and typically had someone in their household who supported their creative practice. When we reconvened after lunch, the first order of business was to share reflections. Having just come from working in one of the most well-known food pantries in DC, I shared that I was most struck by the fact that no one had said the word "poverty." Every single issue we'd been discussing that morning was related to poverty - and no one else could say the word.

For whatever reason, the arts sector tends to segment itself out from other sectors that are also dealing with poor people. I've never really understood whether that's on purpose - perhaps a quiet attempt to avoid the regulation that organizations supporting poor people face, since once you officially work with poor people, and take taxpayer dollars in a different way, you get regulated. It continues to strike me as strange, and in a lot of ways it puts arts organizations in a difficult place when it comes to managing their missions. Having come from organizations where the mission was literally life or death, I'm always surprised at the hurried, rushed, panicky tenor of life in arts institutions. It's gotten so bad that I sometimes remind people that, truly, there are no arts emergencies.

Arts funders are also hesitant to use all of the prescriptive tools they could use to improve the financial health of organizations and individual artists. Imagine if grants to arts organizations paid for - and required - that staff and artists have access to health insurance and a living wage, creating an understanding that the most successful, competitive organizations, the ones able to work with vulnerable communities, have staff who are able to put their own masks on first. And I say "vulnerable" because the data backs it up: most of our institutions are employing, working with, or serving vulnerable populations.

Which brings me back to the prompt. I want to recall Lee's thoughts on the ways community existed before lighthouses. He said this gorgeous thing in his opening: "Before there is a lighthouse, there is a shoreline. Before there is a keeper, there is a community. Before anyone builds a beacon, there are already people finding their way through the dark." The prompt also made me think about what existed before lighthouses, but my mind went in a slightly different direction - toward engineering and design, rather than community. As a person who is staunchly opposed to capitalism but very good at it, I'm always thinking about the technologies we developed simply because Europeans needed to colonize things more efficiently.

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For someone who works in futures, I spend a lot of time thinking about the past and how we got here - both the way-back history and the relatively recent past, which, if we digest it quickly, can help us make better decisions at the most meaningful inflection point. So I think that in order to talk about lighthouses, we have to first talk about empire: the technologies it developed, the cultural and systemic damage it wrought, and what we're left with as a result. What existed before lighthouses? How did we find our way in the dark? And, to give my wife's former colleague, Devon, a shoutout: what do we give - and give up - to belong to empire?

I should insert a bit of a trigger warning here. Transparently, I am angry. I feel rage burning inside of me when I think about empire, about colonization, about how much culture was violently stolen and erased from our planet. Thinking about the damage capitalism has done to our planet, and what we're leaving behind for future generations, pisses me the fuck off. I also curse a fair amount. I have a bunch of vices I'm constantly trying to fix, but swear words are pretty far down the list - so my apologies in advance.

Oddly enough, I've spent a lot of time over the last decade thinking about how we navigated by the stars before we had lighthouses. In 2017, I started a cooperative called Crux, which worked with Black artists all around the world as they dove deeper into immersive technologies and new forms of storytelling - virtual reality, augmented reality, interactive games, projection mapping, all sorts of fun stuff. Crux was so named because it's the constellation sailors used to find their way home if they looked to the south. While Europeans had the North Star, we had Crux. It's also known as the Southern Cross, the brightest constellation in the southern skies - a small, distinctive cross shape. If you take its long axis and extend it out roughly four and a half times its own length, you land close to the south celestial pole.

We also know that the Polynesians have been the best sailors and navigators the world has ever known. It was so extraordinary that it simply wasn't legible to Europeans - they lacked the skills to understand how a "primitive" culture could have traveled so far and wide. (I'll come back to legibility in a bit.) These navigators, who did some of the most sophisticated non-instrument wayfinding in human history, layered on far more than a single star. They tracked entire star paths - the sequence of stars rising and setting at fixed points on the horizon over a night, memorized for specific routes between islands. They read swell direction and the way waves reflected off unseen landmasses, watched bird-flight patterns since certain species range predictably from land, and noted the cloud formations that pile up over islands. The Southern Cross was one reference point in a complex network, not a single waypoint to glance up at once. These wayfinders paid such close attention to what the earth and the ocean were telling them that they successfully migrated among, and settled, more than a thousand scattered islands across the triangle between New Zealand, Hawaii, and Easter Island.

I spent the first part of my life living right on the beach on the Jersey shore, and I remember those summer nights when I could hear the ocean from my bedroom window. I would lie awake and feel the sand between my toes - easy, because there was always sand in my bed - and close my eyes and see really, really far out into the ocean in my mind. I wondered what it would be like to sail all the way out past the horizon, with people I knew and trusted, and to actually know how to do it: to be there at night in the warm, salty air, with only the light of the moon and the stars, off on an adventure. It sounded like the best way in the world to spend a life, and honestly, it still does. And to know that people actually did that, thousands of years ago - amazing.

I digress. The point is that, long before lighthouses, we were successfully navigating the planet and finding our way. Bonfires on cliffs, shorelines, and the very edges of land existed before lighthouses. Perhaps the most famous of these, the Pharos of Alexandria, was built 280 years before Christ. But the expansion of lighthouses is the result of shipping infrastructure that was at

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its most significant between 1600 and 1800, at exactly the same time and in the same places as shipping lanes and colonial trade routes. Those routes moved valued goods, and we all know what they were: sugar, cotton, enslaved people, and manufactured goods, moving between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The British, French, Dutch, and Spanish built lighthouses to protect the ships that protected the profit. A lighthouse on the African coast or in the Caribbean wasn't a neutral safety device; it was infrastructure for an extraction economy.

The concept of an artist evolved around the same time. Transatlantic slavery and trade routes created the first class of truly wealthy people in the world, and these people had surplus money and craved status objects. The consolidation of that merchant capital meant they could become patrons of artists, commissioning music, portraits, and other artwork.

I have a bad habit of pushing back on prompts, but that's yet another vice I'm unlikely to break. In that vein, here's my question: what would it look like if artists and culture bearers refused to be lighthouses and instead became stars?

After European and US colonization in the late 1800s, this history was lost. Children in Hawaii were taught that wayfinding long distances was impossible without instruments - it was part of their K-12 education. These sons and daughters of the sea, and their nonbinary nibblings, were instead taught that their ancestors had drifted directionless, accidentally stumbling upon, and then settling, the Pacific islands.

Last year, my wife and I were in Hawaii and learned about the Polynesian Voyaging Society. In 1976, exactly fifty years ago, they launched the first voyaging canoe to leave Hawaii for Tahiti in 600 years - in large part to refute the European belief that it couldn't be done without instruments. The founders believed that, on that first voyage, they were facing cultural extinction: there was no navigator from their own culture left. They had to travel to a very small island, hundreds of miles away, to find someone who could still navigate that distance without instruments - and that person came and taught them how. By actually building toward the past, they were able to chart a new way forward.

That's my answer. Not a lighthouse. A canoe, navigating by stars that were nearly lost. Building toward the past to chart a new way forward.

And beyond that: what would it look like if our institutions refused to be legible to outsiders and instead focused on being legible to local communities? What would it look like if, instead of participating in extractive capitalist systems - where the most oversight is held by the people who know us the least - we found our way back to intimacy with our closest supporters and contributors? What would it look like if we chose to engage in conversations with our colleagues about what it means for each person to have enough, rather than conversations about our salary scale? To go beyond simple board structures and normalize shared-leadership models at the staff level that prioritize multiple voices at all levels of an organization?

And finally: what happened to not being afraid of the dark? Darkness shrouds; darkness is safe; inhibitions fade away; experimentation can happen in the dark. Not everything needs to be legible to everyone.

My first job after college was as a grants and communications coordinator for The Communications Network, whose mission at that time was to convince foundations that they needed a website and should produce an annual report. From that call for transparency in the early aughts, we've moved to scale, oversight, competition, and, most recently, surveillance. I consult often, and the relationships between board and staff, and between staff and community, seem more fraught than ever before. I think this is structural, and that many of the suggestions

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shared over the past few weeks - and today - get us closer to more sustainable and healthy people, communities, and organizations.

I don't believe, in this political climate, that many of our organizations - especially those doing the deepest, most impactful work with the most historically exploited and extracted communities - can have both legibility and safety. We're far past the time when we can have it both ways, so it's time to make structural changes that fundamentally shift our relationships and our institutions.

Once we accept that, what changes do we make to our governance structures? Do we have more honest conversations about board service - who it's for, and who it should serve? When I was at Fractured Atlas, we had a project that used David Duke's name as a parody, and one of our board members voiced strong concern that the project might offend David Duke. I would argue that if David is offended by our work, we're on the right track.

The word hypernormalisation was coined by Alexei Yurchak, a professor of anthropology who was born in the Soviet Union. He describes how everyone in the Soviet Union knew the system was failing, but no one could imagine any alternative to the status quo; politicians and citizens alike were resigned to maintaining the pretense of a functioning society. Over time, the mass delusion became a self-fulfilling prophecy, with everyone accepting it as the new norm. That's what hypernormalisation is.

It strikes me that the cure for hypernormalisation is a medicine in three parts. The first: being able to see that a system is failing, and being honest enough to admit it out loud. The second: being willing to offer alternatives. And the third: taking some sort of action to prevent the self-fulfilling prophecy from taking hold. This series of conversations is well exceeding my expectations for the first two doses of the medicine. It's up to all of us to administer the third in the weeks, months, and years ahead.

The founders of the Polynesian Voyaging Society didn't wait for someone to build them a lighthouse. They built the canoe. They found the navigator. And they sailed, by starlight, back to themselves. That's what I'm asking us to do. Thank you.

The next entry in the Rolling Speaker Series will be in Minneapolis on August 5th, from Lanxing Fu. All recordings and transcripts will be available on MomentumRevolutions.com.