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The Space Beyond

Building the Way

The Space Beyond

A Conversation with
Cyndi Suarez, Darren Isom,
and F. Javier Torres-Campos



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The Challenge to Power
Toward a New Philanthropy
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In This Issue . . .

COVER STORY

**6 The Space Beyond:
A Conversation with
Cyndi Suarez, Darren Isom,
and F. Javier Torres-Campos**

“How do we encourage folks . . . to actually understand we’re all in the same ecosystem? And how much more powerful could each of our lines of work be if we coordinated and created space to dream and imagine with each other?”



5 Welcome

**22 The Call of Leadership Now:
BIPOC Leaders in a Syndemic Era**

“In this liminal time, BIPOC leaders are being asked to simultaneously dismantle the past, survive in the present, and create an alternative future. Our leadership, needed now more than ever, is being tested like never before.”

by Neha Mahajan and Felicia Griffin

30 The Challenge to Power

“Can we trust an organizational leadership paradigm forged over centuries of oppression to lead us toward liberation, or do we need to reconfigure that model in order to produce different outcomes?”

by Dax-Devlon Ross

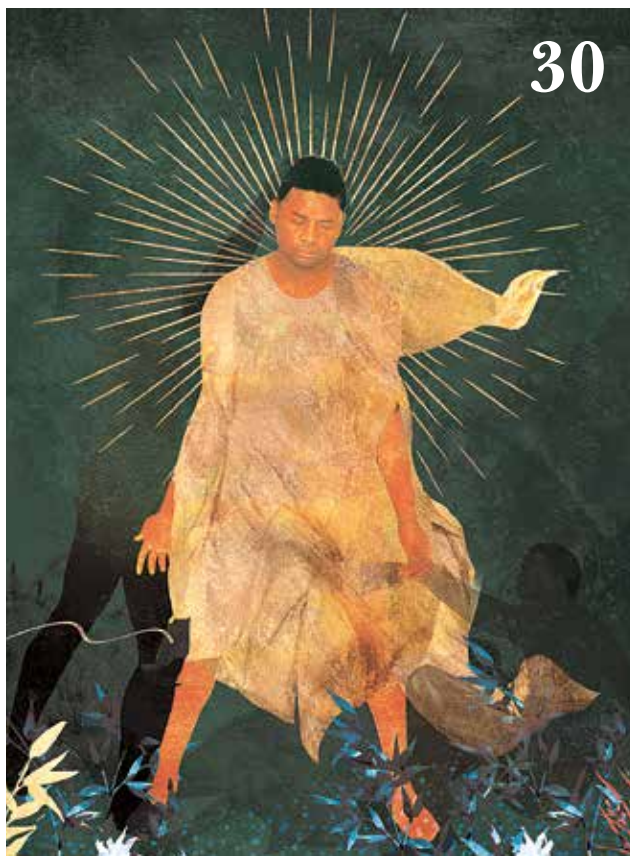
40 What Is Needed Now

“In today’s tumultuous climate . . . we need leadership that can grapple with the challenges. Nonprofits play a critical role in organizing communities and advocating for better policies to face these crises, and we must now assess what we are looking for in our colleagues and ourselves.”

by Linda Nguyen

**48 Recentring Philanthropy toward
Social Justice: A Conversation with
Cyndi Suarez and Isabelle Leighton**

“There’s a very specific kind of analysis we have when we’re working in social justice philanthropy, around what’s considered powerful giving or systemic change, that might look a little different when you start to have more of a conversation that’s grounded in the lived experience of people of color.”



58 **Reparations, Not Charity**

“America’s economy—and its White residents specifically—have benefited from and been fueled by the institution of slavery and the stealing of Native land. Philanthropies like ours—the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation and the Brooklyn Community Foundation—that are funding work to address social, economic, and racial injustice must reckon with this contradiction and support the work of reparations.”

by Jocelyne Rainey and Lisa Pilar Cowan

64 **Toward a New Philanthropy: Advancing the Genius of Black-Led Change**

“In a journal entry, futuristic author Octavia Estelle Butler once wrote, ‘All good things must begin.’ Our collective work emerged from a time of tragedy, and today begins again as a vision of possibility. Together, we are advancing the genius of Black-led change to build a community where all Black people are holistically well and live in dignity and prosperity.”

by Lulete Mola, Repa Mekha, and Chanda Smith Baker

On the Cover . . . “Sun Star” by Carla Jay Harris
[/www.luisdejesus.com/artists/carla-jay-harris](http://www.luisdejesus.com/artists/carla-jay-harris)



70 **Living beyond the Constructs: A Conversation with Cyndi Suarez and Marcus Walton**

“It won’t be just a group of Black people that’s gonna bring this nation to its fullness. It’s gonna be all folks grappling with the impacts of inequity on how they think about what’s possible, and releasing ourselves from these scarcity mindsets and other limitations.”

90 **Leadership Is Voice**

“One of the most powerful things we can do as leaders is to cultivate our voice, especially now, as old narratives and structures give way to an as-yet-undefined future.”

by Cyndi Suarez

96 **ENDPAPER Snake Bearer I**





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WELCOME



Dear Readers,

This edition of *Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine* picks up where our spring 2022 edition, “Going Pro-Black,” left off. The overall inquiry is: Where are we now along the path to transformation?

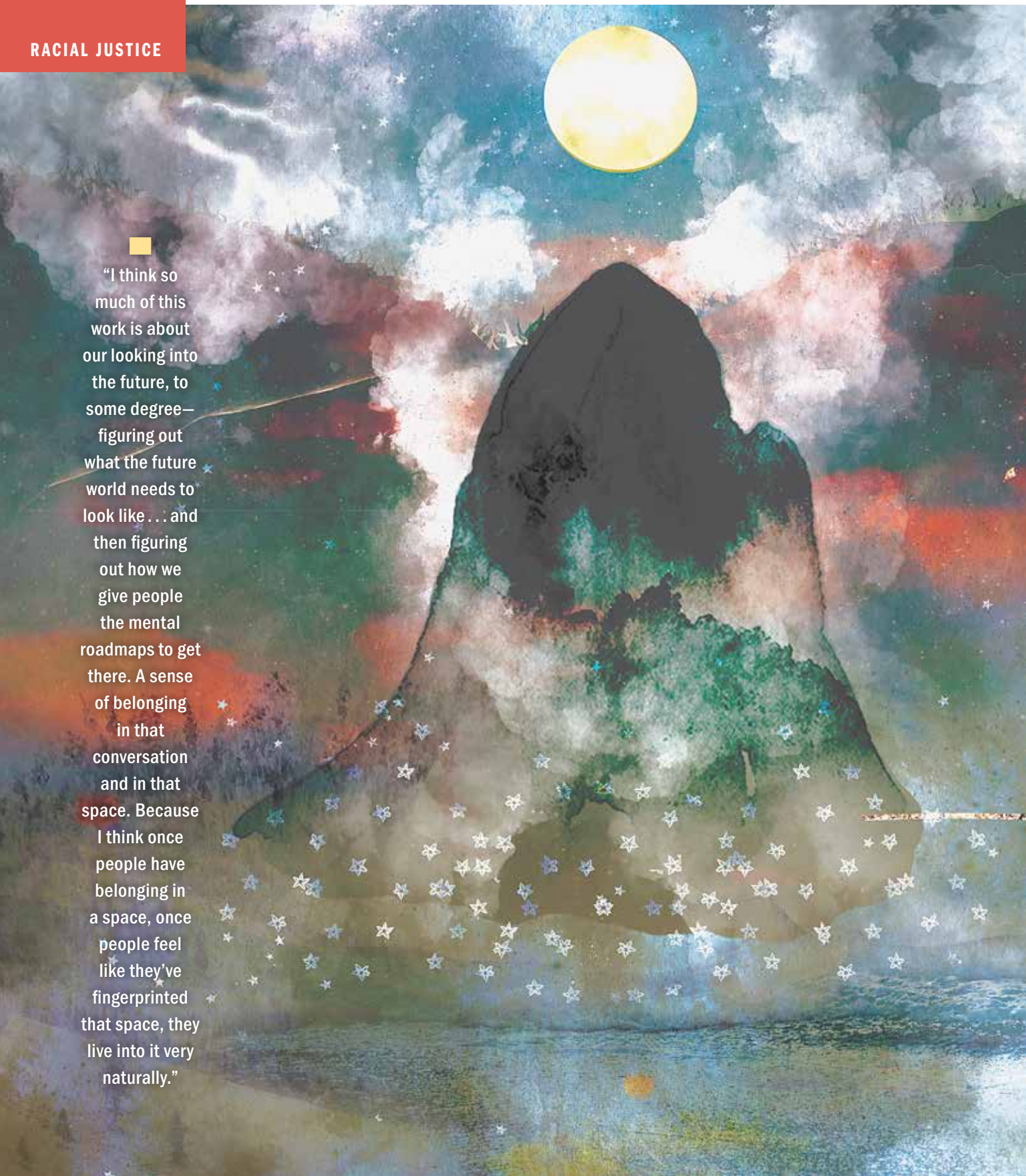
As we gathered to prepare for this edition, the tone and language of participants were that we are winning: we have faced the challenges that came into stark view over the past few years, and we are moving forward. But as the articles came in, I noticed that they weren’t exactly reflecting that. And it wasn’t until a conversation I had with antiracist philanthropic leader F. Javier Torres-Campos and Bridgespan’s Darren Isom that what at first had felt like a disconnect clarified. That conversation became the frame for this edition, as it positions where we are as a sector and as human beings in this “line of flight.”

We’ve understood that many, if not most, of us leading organizations and movement work are using tools for transformation in order to build a bridge from *here* to *there*. When we don’t know what *there* will look like, we create space for visioning and exploring. While my conversation with Darren and Javier started off with thinking about organizations and structures, we ended up talking about the need for *space*.

Thus, this edition is a bridge to the space beyond—a beckoning, empty place waiting for us to enliven it with our brilliance and power. I invite you to consider the following questions: What does it take to create and populate a new space and culture with rigorous beauty and love? What do you bring to that space, and what do you leave behind? How do you make these determinations, and who creates the roadmaps? What are the tools and practices? And how do you keep that space sacrosanct?

Cyndi Suarez
President and Editor in Chief
NPQ

■
“I think so much of this work is about our looking into the future, to some degree—figuring out what the future world needs to look like . . . and then figuring out how we give people the mental roadmaps to get there. A sense of belonging in that conversation and in that space. Because I think once people have belonging in a space, once people feel like they’ve fingerprinted that space, they live into it very naturally.”





THE SPACE BEYOND

A Conversation with Cyndi Suarez, Darren Isom, and F. Javier Torres-Campos

In this conversation, Cyndi Suarez, NPQ's president and editor in chief; Darren Isom, a partner in The Bridgespan Group's San Francisco office and host of the podcast Dreaming In Color; and antiracist philanthropic leader F. Javier Torres-Campos discuss how to bridge to and cultivate the world we want.



Cyndi Suarez: I'm so glad to have the two of you together. Javier, Darren brought you up at a roundtable we had back in December. He described something you talk about, three types of organizations. And I'd love to go into that.

Darren Isom: I can tee it up if that's helpful.

F. Javier Torres-Campos: Yeah, 100 percent.

DI: Javier's my partner in crime, and I throw him into the mix all the time. So, I was lucky enough last summer to convene a group of Black and Brown folks in philanthropy. And this was just a way to honor the folks that are doing the work, and to give ourselves the space and time to think about the work and the luxury of being able to reflect on what success looks like. We convened this group of about 25 really brilliant folks in Martha's Vineyard. It reminded me of a few things. I was at a Donors of Color Network event in New Mexico about a year ago, and my dear friend Urvashi Vaid—who helped start the Donors of Color Network and was a mentor to me and to so many of us in the space—couldn't attend but gave the closing session thoughts via Zoom. She looked out at this group that had been there for two days discussing the fate of the world and mapping our path forward—and we're looking battered as hell, because the world's an absolute mess right now—and she said, "I know the world feels overwhelming right now, and I know it's easy to feel dispirited, but I just want you all to know that we are winning. This is what winning looks like. Winning looks like chaos when you're uprooting broken systems and creating new ones. And I want you to look around the room, and this is what a winning team looks like."

I've been holding on to that; because I think that in many ways, this is the work that we've been called to do. And so the Martha's Vineyard event was building on that—bringing the good people together to talk about what success looks like. And at some point, Javier stands up and does what Javier does. He offers this really profound thought that kind of shapes the conversation, steers it in a different direction. He talked about these three different types of organizations that have shaped the nonprofit—and, more importantly, the philanthropic—world. The first type are the frontline organizations. They are fighting—triage organizations in the trenches handling things as they come and really doing the good work firsthand. The second type are organizations that are living in the future—organizations that

“What roadmaps, what *Green Books* are we giving for future generations to build upon? Because a lot of these things that we’re building now won’t come to fruition for some time.”

are creating the world that we hope to live in. They’re future-leaning and future-looking organizations. And the third type—and here Javier paused, because this was a group of Black and Brown folks, and from a code-switching perspective, he’s signaling, Let’s talk about this type, right? He’s trying to be diplomatic, to figure out what’s the best way to say it. “The third type,” he said, “are organizations that probably shouldn’t exist in the future; but they’re here now. And we have to figure out, as these organizations die, what grows from them.” He called them the “compost pile.” And I remember writing that down and underlining it. And what was clear within that space, interestingly enough, is that the conversation went very naturally to the second group. We were the future, the future-leaning folks. We weren’t there to talk about the compost pile.

And that is a conversation that needs to be had. We need to figure out what we’re going to do with these organizations and what’s going to grow from them. But that’s not where our time should be spent—because that’s where everybody’s time is spent, that’s where everyone’s money is spent, that’s where everyone’s emotional and intellectual capital is spent: trying to figure out what we do with those organizations.

What if we used our time and our thinking to explore that second type and think about what we’re trying to create, who’s in that world, and how we stabilize it in a way that’s smart and thoughtful? That’s what I took away from the conversation. And for me it became a great way to talk about, How do we dream together? How do we think about what we’re trying to create and what we’re putting in place for future generations to take on? It was powerful for me to have that space; but also, it was powerful for me because what a flex, right? What a power flex. I joke that early in my career, I would get invited to these tables, and so much of my time was spent thinking about what’s wrong, what’s broken, what needs to be fixed. And at some point, your flex becomes what’s *right*—what we’re building upon, what we’re going to create. And I think that was such a power shift for me, having that group of folks in the room who were able to think about, What is the world that we’re creating? How are we building on our assets to build something new? *We’re the storytellers for that new world.*

One of my favorite pieces by Duke Ellington is called “Three Black Kings.” Beautiful piece, absolutely gorgeous. It’s a piece that I knew growing up, but I didn’t learn until a few years ago that Duke Ellington had dictated it from his deathbed to his son. Duke Ellington never heard the piece performed. And it just makes me wonder, what are we dictating for others to take away and to build upon? I do think we have to start thinking about what we’re laying down from a foundational perspective. What roadmaps, what *Green Books* are we giving for future generations to build upon? Because a lot of these things that we’re building now won’t come to fruition for some time. And so it’s on us to really think about that second type/bucket and what we are dreaming, what we are looking to create, and how we lay the foundation for that and also create the way for there to be stewards of that space.

FJTC: Darren, that was a really stellar summary and synthesis. You said it much better than I could have. And I have a couple of contextual and background pieces that I’ll share. My practice is very reflective of my understanding of the importance of aligning my behavior with my values, and that is a constant question in my life. I believe that we’re all complicit in the tensions in which we engage, especially in philanthropy, and that interrogation creates an opportunity for me to look back and say, “Okay, those are things I don’t want to do anymore. I didn’t know better then, or I was at a different place in my life.” So, one of the things I acknowledge is that at different stages of my career, I have judged the choices of other people’s lines of work—being like, Yo, there’s nothing that’s gonna happen there. Like, What are you doing? And it wasn’t until two frameworks were shared with me that I changed my perspective.

One is what Darren was describing, which is a framework that climate justice activists use and talk about. They use these three terms that Darren talked about: those of us who are holding a line, resisting, and making sure that those of

“Let’s stop assuming that any of us has an answer. Let’s understand that this is a mosaic—that we’re all playing a unique and necessary role.”

us who are here today and tomorrow are okay; those of us who are building the new and really dreaming into the future; and then those of us who are hospicing and composting the systems that need to transition—but that doesn’t mean that their material composition isn’t necessary for the future, because death is a natural part of life.

The other framework is Deborah Frieze’s Two-Loop Theory.¹ The two frameworks share very similar terminology. And they have helped me every time I’m in a conversation in which I start to see folks lean into the type of judgment that I used to experience of anybody’s work. I’m able to say, “Okay, let’s just stop. Let’s stop assuming that any of us has an answer. Let’s understand that this is a mosaic—that we’re all playing a unique and necessary role. And we can see ourselves in relationship to one another in this type of categorization and respect and value each of those lines.”

Now, to Darren’s point, my work for the last six years has been all about dreaming. And in that space, I developed a strategy at Surdna that first considered how to give R&D money to communities of color—the R&D money that White men get to build what’s in their imagination, that then the rest of us get stuck living in.² What we quickly realized is how truly expensive that work is in communities of color and low-income communities—because we have all of the trauma and unmet basic social infrastructure that need to be addressed first, and throughout the journey, in order for most of us to have the privilege to dream that things can be different.

So, those are the pieces that I’ve been grappling with around how we can cultivate the conditions for more of us to have the privilege and ability to dream and begin to build what’s in our brains. Because I am certain that what’s in the imaginations of communities of color and low-income communities is always going to center care, is always going to center love, is going to find a different way for us to be than the conditions in which we’re living.

CS: It is so interesting that you say this. I like the line of respecting all three types—because, I have to admit, I’m really biased toward innovation. Coming into this role at NPQ, I shifted the organization toward knowledge creation by people of color. This is my third year in this role. It is so much work for me to create the kind of organization whose results can be seen outside. And hiring? Hiring people who can host a space for visionary knowledge creation is no small feat. I literally have to call people and be like, “Why are you not applying?” And the people who are really qualified are like, “I have never done this before.” I’m like, “No one’s done this before.” It’s not like it’s not fun. It’s not like it’s a burden or anything. I feel really privileged to do this work and I can’t believe I get to do this.

And then there’s the content that we’ve gotten as a result of the content that we put out there. I was talking with a leadership practitioner the other day, and she said, “You know, there’s something that you guys have done where now, whenever I’m in a meeting and people are talking real smart, they’ll be like, ‘We need to have an article on this.’” There’s this thing that’s being created in a short period of time, and it’s almost like there was just a green light, and everybody was like, “Of course we do this.”

I’m writing a piece right now called “Leadership Is Voice,” which is based on [Michel] Foucault’s last series of talks on *parrhesia*, the *parrhesiastes*, the history of truth telling—and how in Western thought there has always been an obsession with trying to identify who was a truth-teller and how truth telling was done.³ He talks about the historical shift and how that happened. And then he talks about what you have to do to become a truth-teller. It’s basically spiritual work, really knowing the self.

And as I’m writing this piece, I’m thinking, How do I start it? It made me think of the piece that Moe Mitchell did, “Building



“What I've been realizing and talking to people about is that our voices are also multiple—not just because they're fractured through trauma but because we have connection to many realities at the same time. It's not a linear reality.”

Resilient Organizations,” which we copublished with a couple of other media outlets.⁴ He's talking about the ideological challenges in the movement space and how they're tearing institutions apart, and what needs to happen. How do we grapple with these different levels of experienced trauma, and with everyone trying to create something together and being in different places? That's a bad summary, but when I went to New York to film the video that went along with the article, there was so much planning around it, because it was a really risky truth to tell—which is one of the core things of being a *parrhesiastes*. It's all risky, right? If it's not risky, you're not truth telling, apparently. And so, I remember that he said to me, “I stand behind this.” And I remember just being so happy to hear those words, because I've actually had people pull articles because they're afraid that somebody will disagree with them. It's not uncommon. I've had a lot of people go, “I can't, you have to pull this, I'm in a conversation, I could get fired.” There's a lot of fear. And even if it's not something that immediate, even just the fact that somebody on social media might cancel you. There's just a lot of fear of speaking.

But the idea about the voice part that I got to as I'm wrapping up the article is that our voices, the voices of people of color, are often subordinated. And there's a framework for how to come to voice when your voice is subordinated.

There's a professor at Yale, James Scott, who writes about political life at the level of society. And one of the things he found after 30 years of research is that when someone is subordinated politically in a society, there are four levels before their truth can become part of the mainstream. (I have a piece on it called “Voice under Domination,” which looks at that framework.⁵) But he basically says that you need at least one person to understand what you're saying. That's the first step. Once you say something, someone else goes, “Yup, I had that same thing too, I thought that same thing.” You just need one person to validate your thinking. Then, once you have a few people who think the same—this is all off what's considered “legitimate” discourse, this is people in the back room talking—you get to the second level. Now you have a few people who have a different narrative. And then what happens is there's a point in the main discourse everyone's waiting for, where that narrative can break through. And that's considered to be the breakthrough point—and then it becomes part of the narrative.

So, there's work to do—right?—when a voice is subordinated. It doesn't just speak because you've invited it to speak. And then what I've been realizing and talking to people about is that our voices are also multiple—not just because they're fractured through trauma but because we have connection to many realities at the same time. It's not a linear reality. So, learning to speak like that, and for us to edit that kind of work, is the task before me. It's what I'm always trying to figure out—how to do that. So, I feel like that's where this framework resonated for me, with this idea of a voice, and how hard it is to actually get that thinking out there, even though it's what the world needs; and how reorienting NPQ to do that isn't easy. When I've described it to people, they're like, “Yes!” And I get the money. But the hardest thing to do is actually hiring people and supporting them to do that work.

Even with this issue of the magazine, which was meant to demonstrate how we are winning in terms of all the work we are doing . . . everybody was saying, “Yes, yes, yes, we're winning!” And then I get the articles, and they weren't reflecting that. And I'm like, What's going on?

DI: Interesting. You know what's funny? I love this. I love the idea of voice for a number of different reasons. One, I think that folks of color are masterful storytellers. We've had to be able to use language, stories, conversations as a way of calibrating multiple worlds that were just not aligned. And I think there's something to be said about the fact that whereas this work is hard, this is the work that we were all trained to do. And we're really good at it, honestly.

There's a wonderful quote by Ted Chiang about how the written word, in many ways, values facts in a way that's problematic.⁶ Because once you can write down things, you can hold yourself to those things and hold on to those facts in a way that is used to tell a story. Whereas Eastern cultures, African cultures, the Griots, the bards, they knew to change the

“I don't know that we're ever going to get away from the multiverse, from the everything everywhere all the time, and I think that strategies for the future need to account for that fact. *Because that's the world that's been designed for us.*”

“facts” to make sure the lesson got across—because the lesson was more important than the facts; so, you had to change the story to make sure that the community learned what they needed to learn, right? And that was the art of storytelling, right? How does the story change to make sure that you learn the right lesson? And so, there's something powerful about voice from a narrative-changing perspective.

I also think there's something powerful about voice as an asset that communities of color have, if offered the opportunity to practice it in a way that's meaningful and powerful. It reminds me—we did this piece on what everyone can learn from leaders of color. It was a piece that showed up in *SSIR*, and then there was an *HBR* version.⁷ And what was so powerful about it was that we knew all the time that, ultimately, the whole lesson is that you have to be 20 times smarter. You know, everything that your parents tell you from a work perspective. What we don't recognize is that in navigating the world, you just learn a whole host of different skills and capabilities that your White counterparts do not have to learn. You just become extremely good at some things, because in order for me to have gotten off the stoop in New Orleans, I had to have social skills. I think there's no flex like a White guy in a senior position with no social skills. Like, How did you make it through the world without the social skills that I learned in high school to get an internship?

And so, those skills that we've learned that actually make us masterful leaders, we've had to think about: How do we have motivation to carry out the work? And what does that look like for us? We've had to think about relationships and networks as a way of driving the work. We could not do it on our own. It just wasn't an option! We had to think about our skill sets and behaviors, and, more importantly, about how we use our lived experiences—those things that if they don't kill you professionally in your 20s, they become your assets in your 30s.

I think there is something to be said about how, yes, the work is a lot harder, but I think that we're well positioned to carry it out. And the voice piece—I totally get the concept that we're introducing new ideas that require a lot more buy-in.

I also feel that nothing we're doing is remotely radical—the word *risk* is thrown around way too easily, from a world perspective. And the things that we're doing, the things that we're creating, are rooted in the American experience. Our way of thinking is maybe a different way of interpreting that experience, but there's a solid narrative that we're building upon. We're not introducing new thoughts. There's the Octavia Butler quote, “There's nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns.”⁸ We're just introducing the same thoughts in a way that may be received as radical because of how they are framed and who they're coming from—but it's all quite straightforward. And our work is to really normalize that thinking and those thinkers. That's our flex.

FJTC: I wanted to come back to something you mentioned earlier, Cyndi, when you were talking about voice. You talked about living in different universes—and I've been saying a lot lately that part of the challenge in the United States and leadership at this moment is that most folks don't realize we're living in a multiverse. People are believing dramatically different truths and untruths. And I think that as people of color who have shared values, we're attempting to align some of those truths. And I think that's incredibly powerful. But I don't know that we're ever going to get away from the multiverse, from the everything everywhere all the time, and I think that strategies for the future need to account for that fact. *Because that's the world that's been designed for us.* Unless we're really going to blow it all up and get back to whatever our Indigenous roots were from across the world, I don't see a path away from having to acknowledge that these multiverses exist and intersect on a constant basis—and prepare for that. And, lead in a way that's about clearly defining boundaries for ourselves and for our communities—and building our own—while determining what the terms of engagement and the rules are with which we will work with others who don't share our values. Because to some extent, there will always be either some level of compromise or a line that we're not willing to cross.

“ We have a lot of great leaders who have been reminding us that all this shit is made up. It was made up by individuals who got in the room, decided they had power, and then told everybody else that this was what we were going to do.”

I think about some of the things that folks feel are new. When we think about gender nonconformity or trans individuals, I'm like, This isn't new. I think about the role that Sylvester played in the '70s with gender-bending. I think about Little Jimmy Scott—a largely unacknowledged (in terms of the jazz pantheon) intersex jazz artist from the 1940s and '50s who was jazz artist Nancy Wilson's original inspiration. And so, now that I'm middle-aged, I'm realizing, Ooh, this is exactly what people have been saying for forever. These cycles are pretty consistent at a 40-year clip or a 50-year clip. And so, I'm just starting to see patterns.

I think that, to Darren's point, when we start to win, and more and more people start to choose to get free, a coordinated effort begins to try to do a reset to conservatism. And that's what we're seeing with CRT [critical race theory] and the loss of the AP [Advanced Placement] African American Studies; it's what we're seeing with any of the “Don't Say Gay” and “Don't Say Black” laws that are coming up.

And all of this is a cycle. We have a lot of great leaders who have been reminding us that all this shit is made up. It was made up by individuals who got in the room, decided they had power, and then told everybody else that this was what we were going to do. Now that so many of us realize that, we are seeing leaders—like you, Cyndi—who are saying, “Look, in three years, we can make this shit different; in three years, we can make it better and stronger and more thoughtful, more nuanced, more powerful.” And there are lots of examples. I attended an online session with Sonya Renee Taylor and adrienne maree brown, two individuals who have collaborated to create an institute, the Institute for Radical Permission, that essentially provides a curriculum for individuals to embody what it means to bring back to life the pieces of ourselves that we have allowed to wither on the vine because the world—our families, religion, politics, mentors, whatever—told us we wouldn't survive if we were *that thing*.⁹ And so, I agree with Darren that we are winning, which is why we are seeing this pushback.

DI: I mean, can we just stop and acknowledge that the pushback is too late? I'm serious. It's like my mother says all the time, “By the time Florida says, ‘No, we're not doing this’—honey, that ship has sailed. I appreciate your thinking on this, but that narrative has shifted. And so, your little pushback is

‘Don't Say Gay?’ Okay, good luck with that. You can try. I don't know how much it's going to work.” I joke all the time as a Gen Xer that we should be called the *Sesame Street* generation, because we are the generation whose parents were off working and who literally set us down in front of *Sesame Street*. We were raised by Big Bird and Ernie and Bert—and Mr. Rogers. These shows were radical departures from the previous generation's way of thinking. We grew up holding hands, singing songs of multiculturalism. We thought this was normal.

I'm a seventh-generation New Orleans native; my family's been in New Orleans for nine generations now. I'm the only generation that went to integrated schools. They were de jure segregated before me, de facto segregated after me. I grew up in this hippie-dippie colony—you know, “perfect integration.” I had a Black teacher with an Afro singing Beatles songs to start the day. And what happens when we looked up at some point? It was like, What happened to America? Where are these people going? And we realized, No, we were the ones in *The Truman Show*. America was off being America. We were the ones that were the experiment to some degree, right? And what a beautiful experiment it was. We normalized things that were very new; it was very radical for the time, and we thought of them as being the only option. So, we're sitting there, being like, Why can't these people live with each other? Like, Didn't we learn that in *Sesame Street*? So, in many ways the narrative has shifted already. They can push back; they can say, “Don't say *dot dot dot*”—fill in whatever people they want to put there—but it's already happened, right? And for the better! So, good luck trying to bring that back.

FJTC: I love hearing about your experience, Darren, and I also want to hear from Cyndi—because my experience growing up in the same generation is dramatically different from yours. I grew up in Massachusetts, and I did grow up in a largely White suburban, almost rural, town—and despite

“When I talk about multiplicity, I talk about it as a good thing. Not like we want to flatten things the way that dominant culture does; we do intersectionality beyond just the *isms* of how we are located in society, just even in terms of consciousness.”

my clear White privilege and translucence, folks did not want us there.

My first day at the bus stop, rocks were thrown at me and my brother and sister. My brother's a little darker than you, Cyndi, and to this day, when he travels home, whenever he gets pulled over by a policeman in Holliston [Massachusetts], it's always like, “Do you speak Spanish? Do you speak English?” Because his name is Joan-Pablo Torres, and he's got a California ID because he lives in San Diego. And despite pretty radical parents, I saw a portion of what I see a lot of in other Latinx communities on the West Coast. There was a tendency to conform in order to make it. And it really wasn't until my late teens, when I moved to Philadelphia and was able to integrate into a very dramatically different urban setting, that I was reminded of all of the things that you're talking about.

Growing up, I did not get an education about Indigenous communities. I did not get anything except, you know, Black folks were slaves, in my history books or US civics books. Everything else that I learned, I learned outside of school. So, Cyndi, when I referenced this idea of the cycle, I think the '60s and '70s were about people getting really free. I think in some corners of the world that are now Florida, Tennessee, and other states—but in my case, in my personal experience, I'll say in corners of even “progressive” Massachusetts—it was really effective to get young people to listen to conservative rhetoric. Even young people of color who were isolated and were just trying to find ways to make it through. For whatever that's worth.

CS: Wow, that's really interesting. I grew up in Roxbury, in Boston, which is a historically Black community. My family's from Puerto Rico, from Loíza, which is the Black part of Puerto Rico. My family are the artists that hold and protect Black culture. So, I grew up in a home that I didn't realize until later was unusual, where I never heard anything bad about Black people. We identified as Black. If you go to Puerto Rico

and you talk to my mom's family, they are Black, and they talk about Blackness and culture and history as if they've never heard that Black is bad. And so, that's how I grew up. And it took me a while to realize that other people didn't see it that way.

And I feel really lucky, actually, to have grown up in a home that never had anti-Blackness as part of what we were, because it's very common in Latinx communities to hear that. I mean, my family spans from, like, blond and blue-eyed to Black, Black, Black. Our families have it all. And there're all these coded ways of talking—and actually not so coded. It's common to talk about those things as if White is better, but not in my family. So, I feel really lucky.

And I grew up reading theory and sci-fi, Octavia Butler. I was so upset when I read her last book. I was like, What, there's no more? She has this story called “The Book of Martha.”¹⁰ To me, it's her most amazing story, because it's a futuristic, positive story of this woman who has access to all these different levels of consciousness. So, when I talk about multiplicity, I talk about it as a good thing. Not like we want to flatten things the way that dominant culture does; we do intersectionality beyond just the *isms* of how we are located in society, just even in terms of consciousness.

When I think about our writers [at NPQ], I feel like they need the kind of space that you're describing—where people can actually *grapple*. And right now we're thinking we need to form that, because people are so eager to talk and to speak and to write, but a lot of folks don't seem to have the spaces to actually think beyond the way they're currently embedded. Even if they dream a certain way, it's almost like sometimes it falls down when they try to put it into writing. So, we've been trying to figure out how we can support that in some way—because we're a media company, right? And so for us, I feel like the boundaries of what we do keep getting stretched, because of how we're doing it.

Last year, we did a VoiceLab—a yearlong writing program.¹¹ That was in response to people from the field calling me up as soon as I started writing. When I first came to NPQ, I had just written my book on power.¹² And I was like, I'm not going to write the way the rest of the people at NPQ write; I'm going to write the way I *think*—what I wish NPQ was doing. So I

“I think that we spend so much of our time trying to figure out what’s the narrative that we want to tell and how everyone feeds that narrative that sometimes we rob ourselves of the richness that is our community.”

started writing, and really quickly I started to get people responding. And people were like, “You have to do something about what you’re writing. You can’t just write about it.” So, it was immediate pushback. I was like, I spent my whole life trying to get to the point where I can just write, and people want me now to stop and go back to doing program work? But it’s been constantly that, you know?

And I remember going out to different conferences during that time when I first started, and having a lot of people of color come up to me and tell me—all of them with tears in their eyes—that they too had once wanted to write, but that their life didn’t allow that. And so there was a lot of emotion around writing, and I was like, Wow, this is really deep. Everything got really intense. It wasn’t just writing. Everything that I did, everything, the response, it was so deeply emotional. It was almost like you had to recover, you had to make space for it, it hurt. And so, finally, when I began to get all these calls, before I started a VoiceLab, it started off with people asking me, “Can you coach me on developing my voice?” People just started using that term, from all over the country. Not like they talked to or knew each other. They weren’t using the word *brand*, which is what people used to say back in the day, right? It was like, “You’ve got to develop your brand.” Now everybody had started to use the word *voice*. And I said, “Okay, let’s start a VoiceLab.” A funder heard about it, called me up, and said, “We heard you want to start a voice lab. We have people who want to go—here’s some money.” I mean, it was just like the stuff that we were creating *wanted* to be created. So we did the VoiceLab for a year. We did three months of a deep dive at the beginning, six months of production, three months of distribution. And it was really hard for people to switch from the visioning to the production. It was like, people were mad! In my experience, it’s amazing work. It’s not just writing work—it’s ritual work. And I feel like it really is pushing the boundaries of what we do.

DI: Cyndi, I think what you’re talking about is really interesting. I’m reminded of the angel Kyodo Williams quote, “Love is space.”¹³ And so, for so many of us, it’s about creating space for folks to be. And I do also recognize this as a tension. As a consultant, I’m trained toward data—you give me two data points, I will give you a line. That’s my job. And we’re good at doing that—that’s what we’re here for, right?

At the same time, I think in some ways success can be demonstrating the plurality of a community. Particularly for communities of color, I think that we spend so much of our time trying to figure out what’s the narrative that we want to tell and how everyone feeds that narrative that sometimes we rob ourselves of the richness that is our community. And I wonder how much your job, Cyndi, from a storytelling perspective, is to give us all the space to tell our various stories—where they intersect, and they mostly do, or where they don’t, to some degree. I think that there’s something very powerful in that.

New Orleans was a Black city—a Black ass city—particularly when I was there in the ’80s and ’90s—and I grew up in a Black home. And I joke all the time about how my parents made an active choice to pull me out of the Black Jesuit school for kindergarten and put me in the integrated hippie-dippie school for first grade. And my grandmother was so worried that I’d be meeting White people. We have various White people and various Black people—all the shades. It’s New Orleans, right? But I’d never really had any interactions with White people. They were there. You saw them—I saw them on TV, really. But you live in a Black community, go to a Black school.

That was success, particularly for middle-class Black families—it was success to create your world where you didn’t have to be bothered with White people to some degree. And if you were privileged enough to do all the things—from grocery shopping to banking to schooling—without having to deal with White people, that was success.

CS: Heaven.

DI: Listen. Seriously, right? And so, I remember my grandmother sat me down, was like, “You’re going to this school where people are different from you. It’s important for you to respect their differences and for them to respect your differences.” Well, I didn’t know what she was talking about. And

“We’re a world of narratives. We’re

Americans. This country’s a bunch of crazy fake narratives, right? Where the narrative is helpful, hold on to it—where it isn’t, let it go.”

so, I had been at the school for a few months, and my mother kept asking questions, trying to figure out what it was like for me to go to school with White folks. I had this one lighter-skinned aunt who was from this random neighborhood in New Orleans called Gentilly—we were from Uptown New Orleans, so, in my mind, Gentilly was the other side of the world. And my mom was like, “How’s your teacher?” I was like, “Oh, I think she’s great. I think she’s from Gentilly.” My mom asks, “How is your school best friend?” “Oh,” I say, “He’s great. I think he’s from Gentilly.” And at some point, my mother realized that I thought White people were just light-skinned Black people from Gentilly.

So, whereas everyone else can talk about the first time they realized that they were Black, I can share the first time I realized that everybody *wasn’t* Black. My parents had to explain to me, “No, those aren’t Black people, those are White people.” To me, White people were the people you saw on TV. But there were a lot of things on TV that weren’t real. Santa Claus was White on TV. Folks are eating tuna casserole on TV—that clearly wasn’t real. (I was in New Orleans; nobody was eating tuna casserole, right?) So, there were all these things that were fictional on TV, and I thought White people were fictional, too.

We’re a world of narratives. We’re Americans. This country’s a bunch of crazy fake narratives, right? Where the narrative is helpful, hold on to it—where it isn’t, let it go.

FJTC: A thing that I’ll always hold on to: as a young person, whenever there would be conflict between me and a friend, my mom would always say to me, “You have to remember, you’ve learned what a galaxy is, you’ve learned what a universe is. Every brain is its own universe. And you have to engage with it as such and not expect any of it to map over yours.”

And I share that to be able to loop back, because you have both shared some childhood stories. And Cyndi, similarly to yours: My mom was one of 16; my dad was one of eight.

And my mom got ridiculed—she’s one of the youngest—because she’s the only one in the family that married another light-skinned Puerto Rican. And so the family, still to this day, tells my mom, “Dañastes la raza!” [you’ve ruined our race]—because she lightened the next generation’s skin. So, Blackness and Indigeneity were what was valued in my family. And also, out of the 24 aunts and uncles who each had three kids, including my brother and sister, I’m the only one ever born outside of the island of Puerto Rico. So, my existence as a child was that I didn’t belong in the White spaces in Holliston, Massachusetts, but I would go back to Puerto Rico and I would get teased by everybody and reminded about how terrible the United States was, and reminded that Blackness was the goal, Indigeneity was the goal. And, “You’re too American,” and, “You’re too White,” were the things that I heard growing up. And so, I often share a metaphor inspired by the artist Ceci Méndez-Ortiz.¹⁴ She’s a crazy-beautiful artist—she’s been doing a lot of work with Ekuia Holmes, a name that might be more familiar to you.¹⁵ But as an artist, she has explored that same intersection of not being from here nor there and how you create spaces where you do belong. And often, it’s first in our own head. And the metaphor that she ended up using in her artistic practice was an amphibian: I know how to swim underwater, and I have fish that are friends, and I know how to function and breathe on land. And I have friends that are bears, but I live in a world where my bear friends sometimes eat my fish friends, and I have to figure out how to reconcile these things. I’m not from here and I’m not from there, but I can figure out how to maneuver and navigate across all of these worlds.

For whatever that’s worth in this conversation, as I think about how I apply that in my leadership practice, and I think about dreaming for the future—for me, the way that Darren and you were talking about Reverend angel’s quote about “space,” that love is actually creating space, I just want to double down on that. And allowing people to make sense of the world and come to a comfortability in their own knowledge, in their own story, in their own skin in a way that this world doesn’t usually make easy for people to do.

That’s the future of leadership for me: creating spaces that allow people to fully enter as who they are, understanding their value, and figuring out how the puzzle pieces shift so

that everybody is always fully who they are and feeling welcome and able to contribute the best of who they are.

DI: I think that value piece is so important and powerful. And I joke about my thinking that White people were just light-skinned Black people from Gentilly, but I really had no sense of White people thinking that they were better than me. None of that made any sense to me. It was the most ridiculous idea. I had no mental models to accommodate White supremacy, honestly. So, I think there's something to be said about, How do you have the sense of empowerment around who you are? Recognizing who you are is really important.

I had a conversation with David Thomas some many moons ago. He's the president of Morehouse College, and it was one of those conversations where you're interviewing someone about something else and they start dropping gems. You're like, Let me take out my notebook, because this brother's dropping gems—I've got to write some of this down. He offered this path to success for a person of color or anyone from a marginalized group. And it was a three-step process. The first was figuring out what makes you different—from a cultural perspective, from a life perspective, from a story and narrative perspective—and being proud of that. The second step was finding yourself at an organization or company where your difference is critical to the success of the organization, to its work. Not a *nice to have*, not a *side have*, but a *without it, success won't happen*. And the third, which was the most interesting, was surrounding yourself with people who encourage you to hold on to your difference in service of success.

And it was funny, because as he said it, I could think of folks I knew for whom something happened at each step, right? Like, the first were people who never really understood what made them different. There was a rush for assimilation, there was a rush to show who they were, or they weren't proud of that difference—they were ashamed, and they went to the whole, you know, Yoshino, the hiding and covering piece.¹⁶ The second were people who landed at places that told them their difference was important—but it wasn't. They got beat up for it, and they were never really able to use their difference in a way that drove success—it wasn't really appreciated. And the third were folks who landed jobs where their difference was important, but they lost their

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difference—where basically, in the process, it was too hard to hold on to their difference, and so they ended up turning into the things that they were trying to avoid.

I think of those three pieces in terms of the knowledge work that I lead at Bridgespan: How do I give lessons in each of those? What makes you different, and why is your difference critical to success? And here's a community of folks who are going to allow you to hold on to it. I think that if we can respect that in our thinking, that's how we get to impact; that's how we get to success; and that's how we create that second bucket—that's how we create that second bucket that's different from where we are but is rooted in those values that anchor where we want to be.

CS: When I started to write my book, I spent years researching. I looked across 10 fields of research, from the Vedic scriptures to neuroendocrinology, and they all said the same thing: that what triggers power dynamics is difference—not just a perception of difference but one's *relationship* to difference. And it was the first time I realized that I loved difference. And you know how people are always like, 10 percent of people are this or 10 percent of people are that? I was like, There must be 10 percent of people who love difference, because most people don't. So, I love what you're saying about difference. I pulled aside this article to read today. It was Walter Mosley saying the United States is getting dumber.¹⁷ And I think that there's just such a fear of difference right now, and it actually does make you really dumb. I think there's a desire to squash difference in organizations.

But I like what you're saying, Darren—because in terms of writing at NPQ, as soon as I came into this role, I started to talk about multivocality, that what we were editing for was not uniformity. But I don't know what it is—like you were saying—that happens to people on the way. It is hard for people to hold on to their difference, and to even know what it is. I think it's interesting that the three of us had some

experiences in our lives—it seems like that’s a commonality between us—that no matter what the circumstances and the differences in how we grew up, there was a love of Blackness in some ways. Which is actually really not common. And how do the three of us have that in common no matter what our crazy-different circumstances?

DI: And I do wonder how that love of Blackness and that love of our difference—even though I don’t know if I thought I was different—becomes something that you feed. It becomes something that you naturally justify in your thinking. How do you create a mental model around that? And I think about all the things that I just *had*—my parents were giving me just crazy mental models—now that I realize the work that they did to give me alternative narratives.

And I remember when my teacher would read Shel Silverstein to us when I was in second or third grade—Miss Antosca, bless her, she was a wonderful White woman, a great teacher. I didn’t learn that Shel Silverstein was White until I was in college. There was this picture of him, and he looked like a light-skinned Black man to me (from Gentilly, of course). And so, in my mind, when I looked at the back of the book and there was this Black poet, *I could be a poet.*

So, the mental models that I’d created—that I’ve spent my life feeding into—I’m so thankful in some ways that I had normalized these very abnormal narratives. But I wonder how much of that was just this love of Blackness, this love of cosmopolitanism (small c), this love of urban spaces, cultural appreciation—xenophilia. That was something that was embedded in me early; and so, as a result, everything fed into that—everything was used as justification for that at an early age and through life.

CS: As we wrap up, I would love to bring this back to the three organizations. I’m wondering if there’s a connection there.

FJTC: Part of what I was going to bring up at this particular moment was to come back to this Latinx connection and the comment that you made of folks who have a difficult time hanging onto difference. One of the things that’s been concerning me, Cyndi, is that more and more, as I read the news about the folks who were involved in January 6, the folks who are leading nationalist movements and White supremacist movements, I’m seeing Latino last names.

CS: I know. They’re leading this, yeah.

FJTC: And I was talking to a couple of AAPI friends of mine, and they’re like, “Oh, no, the same thing is happening in our community.” It’s about proximity to Whiteness, and it’s about shame. So, I bring that back to the three organizations and to thinking about the preconditions that allow for humans to believe in and build a different world. And shame is something we need to do away with. It’s not a useful emotion, and traditionally it is at the root of people seeking power and control over others—being greedy and believing that material items and/or control and title or positionality make them better, because you’re ashamed of whatever the difference is. You’re seeking to conform to a system that tells you that this is what success looks like. And so, I think about those who are either leading nationalist movements or who are just trying to get through the day to day and figure out where the next meal is coming from or how they pay rent.

There’s just a lot of healing that we need to do in order, I think, to build a critical mass of individuals who are prepared to do what Deborah talks about in her Two-Loop Theory, which is to walk out and build something new. Whether those folks want to go back to a historic context of Indigenous community living, or maroon community strategies, as they’ve existed throughout this country and throughout the planet, or whether folks really want to figure out if there are pieces of how our ancestors lived that we can couple with pieces of our lives today and build something that’s totally new and rooted in care and love.

And the last piece that I’ll share here is—well, two pieces: Bridgit Antoinette Evans, from Pop Culture Collab,¹⁸ has talked about a narrative strategy along these lines of, How do we just begin to stop the Black and White conversation? We’re all Indigenous. We all come from either a Celtic tribe, or a Taíno tribe, or an Indigenous tribe in the United States, or an Indigenous tribe from the continent of Africa or from somewhere in South America. And if we actually just took a little bit of time to get back to those roots and what those communities were, we might be able to find more common ground. And the other thing I want to mention is that this idea of futurism and the folks that have been pushing this—I think we all know—is also not new. I don’t want to pretend that it is. Makani Themba is somebody I have deep respect for who has been facilitating these dialogues in communities of color for a long time.¹⁹ Contemporary individuals who I deeply love and admire and respect are doing this over and over again: Sage Crump, Aisha Shillingford. . . .²⁰

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CS: What do you say, Darren?

DI: When I think about this work, I feel there is something very powerful in the fact that, as we consider that second type of organization and this future thinking and creating this future world, there are those of us who were created for this conversation. I think there are those of us who have literally spent our lives thinking about what's next. I think that's our role. That's our responsibility. I think it's important for us to live into that and for us to honor those folks who are doing it.

I think that the Afrofuturism conversation is not a new one. Obviously, we can list all the folks that Javier talked about. I mean, Black people have been dreaming about a future since the beginning of time. I think we're the only community where success is not imagined in a lifetime. Black leaders from the beginning of time have been talking about what our children are going to be doing. From mountaintop speeches to Harriet Tubman to Frederick Douglass to the founding fathers—the Black Founding Fathers, if you will. I think that this work is one that's always been happening.

I think that we live in the fullness of time, where we just have to carry the baton and think about what the work is to carry it forward. I think it's important for us to recognize the power of narratives in changing this work. And I was going to quote Bridgit, only because in my conversations with her, she talks a lot about the marriage equality movement from a narrative change perspective—and lots of things that were flawed about it we can talk about another day—but also how there was something really powerful about ultimately figuring out: Who were the folks who were important for success within the movement? And how do we give people mental models and roadmaps and examples of what success looks like for them? How do we tell a conservative White grandpa in Arkansas that it's okay for him to love his gay grandson? How do we give him space? How do we normalize that? And we see it play out! We see the commercials now, where grandpa's putting makeup on his gender-transitioning grandchild. We're giving people space that this can be you! Right? This is what it looks like to change your ways or to live into it.

So, I think so much of this work is about our looking into the future, to some degree—figuring out what the future world needs to look like, or at least what the anchors of that future

world are, and then figuring out how we give people the mental roadmaps to get there. A sense of belonging in that conversation and in that space. Because I think once people have belonging in a space, once people feel like they've fingerprinted that space, they live into it very naturally. And we're a country of narratives.

I think the other conversation we need to have at some other point is, How do we bridge that first bucket and the second bucket? How do we give the folks on the frontline the space to dream? And I think that that's a very powerful space, because those are the people who have the solutions that are real. And those are the people who actually in many ways are the most genius, if given the space to think and to build and to own what we're trying to build. So, those are thoughts that come to mind for me.

CS: This is so great. I'm walking away with this kind of juxtaposition. We started off thinking about organizations, and we are leaving talking about that what's needed is space. And so I almost feel like I want to start a whole other conversation about that. But it's really fascinating that everything has been about space and not about organizations or structure, even though we started off talking about it like that. So, I don't know what to make of it. I feel like I need to think about that.

FJTC: I was just going to say, it's a piece of this idea that space is the type of culture that I'm trying to cultivate inside of organizations now.

CS: That's what I'm trying to figure out. How do you?

FJTC: It's what you're doing, Cyndi. It's where you are. It's what you're seeing happen. It's why all of these people are saying to you, “I need my voice cultivated.” And you can take

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advantage of that because of the way that you’ve created space in your organization to be responsive to people’s differences and to people’s desires. You are a really great example.

DI: I found the angel Kyodo Williams quote, so I can read it to you guys. It’s really powerful, and it’s from her *On Being* interview.²¹ She’s the author of *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*.²² And she says, for growing numbers of us “our sense of survival, our sense of thriving is embedded in a sense of movement and spaciousness and increasing allowance for more and more difference.” She says, “[L]ove is space. It is developing our own capacity for spaciousness within ourselves to allow others to be as they are. . . . [T]o come from a place of love is to be in acceptance of what is, even in the face of moving it towards something that is more whole, more just, more spacious for all of us.”²³ It’s a beautiful quote, and it gets to this idea of love, this idea of spaces as an act of love. I think it also gets at: How do we engage in this work with love? Love for ourselves, love for our communities. Because ultimately, at the end of the day, all that’s done in love is done well.

I think from a nonprofit and a philanthropic perspective, you engage very differently with communities, with people, going back to *ourselves*. Black love is when you *love* them. A lot of folks are out here treating communities like patients, and they don’t have no bedside manner. When you love someone, and you see the full potential that comes with that love, you interact with folks very differently: your expectations are higher, all the things are higher. And so, I think it’s spaciousness, but it’s also spaciousness as an act of love and not an act of neglect.

FJTC: So, what I would say, Cyndi, coming back to the organizational piece, is: How do we encourage folks—if we are going to talk about organizations—to actually understand we’re all in the same ecosystem? And how much more powerful could each of our lines of work be if we coordinated and

created space to dream and imagine with each other? But that means then that we have to come back to budgets and money and philanthropy. And so, it’s a piece that I never forget.

I was working with Gibrán Rivera and Maanav Thakore when I was working at the Boston Foundation,²⁴ and we started to pull a bunch of organizations together, and I said, “Listen, y’all. You’re so tired of philanthropy telling you what you should be doing or what you need to do. Why don’t each of you just commit to, as a collective, that in every grant you write, you’re going to put \$5,000 of research and development expenses in your submission? And let’s see over time, in a year or two years, how much this aggregates? And can everybody in the room just commit to that whatever you raise in your R&D line items, you’re putting it into a collective pool for nonprofits to (a) dream and coordinate but also (b) study philanthropy? As opposed to allowing philanthropy to study us—how do we just shift the positionality?” But of course, it requires time and space, and in the world that we’re living in, that time and space are facilitated by resources.

And so, this is also about philanthropy learning to value that the love that needs to be given is not going to be tied to a program—is not going to be tied to a direct impact in our generation, in our lifetime, in the time that we’re in our roles. But it really is about the cultivation of space for real transformation that requires much more than what we are used to giving.

CS: Wow, this is amazing. For me, I feel like I’m always trying to cultivate space in my consciousness and in my day, so, I’m always trying figure out, What do I not need to do? I’m almost protective of it. And I’m really left with this idea of like, How do we . . . I don’t want to say *institutionalize* it, because I feel like it’s an oxymoron—and I feel like even the idea of organizations really limits what’s beyond that. So, I’m walking away from this thinking of the space beyond, where we dream about things being in it—but right now it’s a space with nothing in it, because whatever I’m thinking maybe can’t come ’til I’m there. You know what I mean? Everything from here makes you think grants, organization, structure—but I’m like, Wow, it really is how to cultivate space. So, thank you so much. This has been amazing, and I hope we do more of it.

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The Call of Leadership Now

BIPOC Leaders *in a* Syndemic Era

by Neha Mahajan and Felicia Griffin

Transformative healing work is essential to getting us from the world that exists to the world we are calling in. We do this work from the belief that we will hit a tipping point when leaders who truly want to transform our conditions, the ecosystem, and the way we lead reach a critical mass.

W

e are living through a syndemic—a time of multiple crises causing seismic economic, political, environmental, technological, and social shifts, which are long from being settled.¹ Black, Indigenous, people of color, and Global South communities are at the frontlines and faultlines of these changes that are reshaping the world. Institutions, hierarchies, and forms of leadership rooted in Western colonial ideology are failing, being renegotiated, and getting deconstructed—even in the face of intense backlash.

In this liminal time, BIPOC leaders are being asked to simultaneously dismantle the past, survive in the present, and create an alternative future. Our leadership, needed now more than ever, is being tested like never before. We are tasked with fighting for short- and long-term goals in tandem. We are called on to hold space for grief, trauma, and despair while also uplifting hope, courage, and vision. We have to navigate the scarcity created by economic, racial, and gender inequality while tapping into an abundance mentality to demand what we need. We must lift up our unique histories and conditions while also stepping up our practice of transforming conflict, resisting divide-and-conquer tactics, and deepening solidarity with one another.

This is the call of leadership this moment requires, and many of us are answering. In 2016, six women of color in the Colorado organizing and social justice movement ecosystem came together and formed Transformative Leadership for Change.² We were struggling with burnout, lack of sustainability, unaddressed trauma, conflict





The rise of transformative programs offering leaders tools to heal and re-vision our movement work is not simply a trend; it is a healthy response to the pressure cooker of conditions that BIPOC social justice movement and organizational leaders are facing.

and competition, and internalized/systemic oppression. Frustrated with leadership programs that are rooted in our “deficits” and that reinforce dominant culture “hard skills” to navigate—and perpetuate—the nonprofit industrial complex, we envisioned a space that centered BIPOC experiences, collective healing, transformative relationships, abundance, creativity, proactivity, radical vision, and embodied practice.

A PRESSURE COOKER

The rise of transformative programs offering leaders tools to heal and re-vision our movement work is not simply a trend; it is a healthy response to the pressure cooker of conditions that BIPOC social justice movement and organizational leaders are facing: White supremacist violence, COVID-19, climate crisis, unprecedented global wealth inequality, decades of defunding the social safety net, intensifying surveillance and militarization of our communities, growing authoritarianism, and rollback of civil and reproductive rights—to name a few. Leaders moving work through nonprofit organizations are also contending with the “great resignation” and major shifts in the workforce;³ unprocessed grief from the pandemic and years of escalating racial violence; and short-lived performative responses by philanthropy to the events of 2020.

We have also reached a moment in time of almost complete co-optation of our work by the nonprofit sector. The professionalization of social justice organizing work, which began in the 1970s, has now become the place where the vast majority of our movement work lives.

Movement leaders of previous generations made the intentional decision to use the nonprofit organizational status as a vehicle to raise funds and sustain livelihoods—but this has now become the default way of operating overall. And as nonprofits moved away from their member-driven and member-funded mutual aid and organizing roots, they took on a hierarchical structure modeled after corporate culture, became dependent on grants from foundations/

government, and became run by “expert” staff to provide services or lead advocacy efforts. Very few leaders entered this work in order to build a professional career, but many of us have reluctantly or even unconsciously channeled our energies into surviving the nonprofit and philanthropic industrial complex as an end in itself.⁴

It is no surprise that social justice organizations are imploding under the stress of the current moment and the contradictions of existing in the dominant system while simultaneously advancing visions and values for change. We are pulled in many directions that uncomfortably exist at the same time. Are our social justice and movement-building organizations places to win concessions from existing power structures on a macro level? Are they spaces to heal trauma and experiment with radical new ways of being on a micro level? Are they political and community homes, places to find belonging and identity? Are they places for economic mobility, attracting resources that don’t exist in our surrounding communities? Are they primarily workplaces, sites of labor and management struggles? Are they vehicles to build one’s own celebrity, brand, and social media following, fueled by the pressure to gain attention from academia, philanthropy, and the political elite? Are they places to overwork, sacrifice, and martyr ourselves to avoid deeper trauma in our lives?

TLC is holding up a mirror to ourselves and our peers, asking these and other hard questions. TLC formed as a place where leaders of color could address the issues that get pushed aside to the shadows of our day-to-day work (trauma, burnout, ego, conflict, abuse, systemic inequities) until they explode—fracturing leaders, organizations, and even whole communities with the fallout. It has become clear to us that spaces are both required and missing that cultivate deep healing and transformation to help leaders move through this shadow work and rise to the leadership this moment demands.

The transformative spaces we are seeking and building include room for healing, both individually and in community,

The healing and support individuals receive in a one-on-one therapeutic relationship—in which mental patterns and stories can be brought to light and met nonjudgmentally and with empathy—is magnified tenfold when it is received and offered back in community.

and for both self- and community care; teaching and practicing principles of transformative justice and generative conflict; frameworks of decolonization and re-Indigenization; land- and earth-based practices; body-based (somatic) and trauma-informed work; authentic relationship and movement building across BIPOC identities, issue areas, tactics, and other silos; and proactive visioning.

This is a significantly different approach from “leadership development” programs that implicitly or explicitly reinforce corporate models of success. While fundraising trainings, management courses, DEI consulting, strategic planning, and even executive coaching can be useful, they are often superficial remedies for the deeper, endemic issues described above. Even when these skills are applied toward sustaining social justice organizations, they need fertile soil in which to grow. For example, fundraising skills will thrive best in a leader who also experiences healing and empowerment in their relationship to money, as we describe in more depth below. But beyond this, the real goal is for leaders to radically shift their approach to reclaiming and stewarding wealth, in line with our movement values, to create economies centered around collective care. The aim of these transformative programs, in other words, is to create space for leaders to nurture the ways of being, thinking, and doing to create the world we want—not to create a pipeline of professional nonprofit executives as an end in itself.

TLC’S THEORY OF CHANGE: FOUR LEVELS OF TRANSFORMATION

TLC’s core program is a yearlong fellowship that brings together a cohort of 20 BIPOC social justice nonprofit leaders across the state of Colorado. (TLC is committed to a place-based strategy—building deeply and over time in one state ecosystem and at multiple levels of leadership within organizations.) TLC fellows come from organizations that are building long-term power for and with BIPOC communities. This includes strategies of community organizing,

public policy and advocacy, civic engagement, cultural/arts organizing, land/food sovereignty, healing justice, and more. Their organizations work at the intersections of multiple social justice issues, including voting rights, criminal justice, economic justice, education justice, environmental justice, food justice, healing justice and mental health/trauma-informed care, im/migrant rights, labor rights, LGBTQIA+ liberation, racial justice, and reproductive justice.

We ask fellows to step away from their day-to-day organizational duties and participate in two multiday healing retreats and monthly daylong sessions. After going through the fellowship experience, leaders graduate into an alumni network, where they continue to access programming and work together on ecosystemic needs. While we started with leaders serving in executive director roles, we have also led cohorts of non-ED senior staff and are planning a cohort for community organizers. We see our organization and fellowship as a complement to our local movement ecosystem by nurturing healthy and sustainable leaders and organizations.

The core of TLC’s programming is a journey of healing in community. Using ancestral and culturally rooted practices, we work to create a deeply supportive container where individual healing journeys can be witnessed and held by the collective. We invite BIPOC leaders to step out of the organizational roles with which we are often highly identified and into a space where we can be present with one another’s whole humanity.

The healing and support individuals receive in a one-on-one therapeutic relationship—in which mental patterns and stories can be brought to light and met nonjudgmentally and with empathy—is magnified tenfold when it is received and offered back in community. This is especially true when creating a space to address any kind of collective trauma, such as racism. The practice of creating a community of belonging, vulnerability, story sharing, trauma release, and celebration—anchored by ritual and ceremony—is a

*TLC's theory of change requires transformation on four levels: **individual, organizational, collaborative, and ecosystemic**. All rely on a foundation of deep inner work and healing—both individually and in community.*

powerful magic that opens up all kinds of possibilities of transformation that go far beyond our individual journeys.

The type of transformation we can begin to seed in organizations, collaborative tables, coalitions, and campaigns—and throughout the ecosystem—is much more possible, creative, and expansive when it is based on this foundation of individual self-reflection and healing held in community.

TLC's theory of change requires transformation on four levels: **individual, organizational, collaborative, and ecosystemic**. All rely on a foundation of deep inner work and healing—both individually and in community. We do not believe that it is possible to lead external transformation without significant internal transformation. Western colonial and patriarchal paradigms have siloed these aspects of our liberation, but many of us are creating spaces to incubate new leadership models, organizational models, and social change models that weave both internal and external transformation work together.

Take the leadership challenge of raising resources for BIPOC-led social change organizations, which are systemically underfunded. We have had well-meaning funders and partners tell us that training BIPOC leaders to learn hard skills around fundraising is the primary solution to this issue.

The TLC approach is to start with **individual** transformation: exploration around healing that is needed regarding wealth, class, and race—within the collective container of TLC. How do we shift scarcity mindsets that are rooted in deep and real experiences with poverty and oppression? What is our relationship to money that has been extracted from the colonization, exploitation, slavery, and genocide of our communities? How do we stand in our power in terms of what we need and deserve for our lives and our communities?

This then starts to open up questions regarding **organizational** transformation: How does our relationship with money impact how we interact with funders and donors? Are we valuing our labor? Are we asking for what we truly need

to do transformative social change work? How do we steward resources coming into our organizations in ways that align with our values?

These inquiries lead to explorations in transforming our **collaborative** spaces, as well. As leaders move out of a scarcity and competitive mindset, we begin to take small but radical collaborative actions, such as sharing our budgets and funder lists/relationships, applying for joint grants, advocating for one another to receive funding, and demanding that funders stop pitting organizations against each other through competitive grantmaking.

And, ultimately, we come full circle to the **ecosystemic** level, where we recognize that the entire ecosystem—including philanthropy—needs to transform if we are to thrive in our leadership. Our deepest challenges with funding don't stem from individual deficits or lack of skills; they are rooted in the very origins of White supremacy and capitalism. Standing more in their power around their relationship to race, class, wealth, and philanthropy, the last cohort of TLC fellows came together to compile a list of recommendations (which may turn into demands) for Colorado philanthropy to be in a more transformational relationship with BIPOC movement leaders. From reparations and land back to radical changes in investment and grantmaking practices, they put forth a bold call to action that cannot be easily dismissed when coming from a collective of organizations. This platform for change was presented in a forum where funders were invited to the TLC fellowship, on our terms, to build authentic relationships with leaders that go beyond the transactional power dynamics of the grantmaking relationship.

The ecosystemic level is also where we do vision work toward reclaiming and collectively stewarding wealth, land, and other resources for our communities. In TLC's first cohort of fellows, we experienced a shared revelation when we looked up from the thousands of dollars in our individual budgets to see a scale of the millions of dollars contained

in our collective balance sheet. What could we achieve if we invested all of our organizational budgets into a community credit union that reinvested back into our work and social justice fights? What if we bought land and buildings together as a collective? Beyond sustaining our individual organizations, we now have the potential to share and align resources; sustain a larger social justice movement made up of interdependent organizations; build small-scale cooperative and regenerative economies; and create interventions in extractive capitalism, divestment, and gentrification of BIPOC communities.

Another major impetus for creating TLC was the level of burnout, sacrifice, and lack of sustainability that we experienced as women-of-color movement leaders and nonprofit directors. Unlike White male executive directors in our ecosystem who successfully stayed in their role for years and even decades, we watched women of color cycle through leadership roles at huge cost to themselves and their lives. We explored the solution of an organizational sabbatical policy, understanding from our lived experience that such a policy would not work in a vacuum. We knew we would need a significant internal, collective, and institutional culture shift for even one of us to take advantage of a sabbatical.

So, in this case, we began again at the **individual** level. Recognizing that healing is required for many of us to even access the desire or ability to say yes to time off, we explored and began the process of releasing intergenerational racial trauma around our relationship to work, rest, health, our bodies, boundaries, and—ultimately—our worth. As leaders begin to decolonize their relationship to work, it becomes much easier to advocate for their organizations to create sabbatical policies for themselves and their staff (the **organizational** level). Being able to work through this collectively with peers allows leaders to compare policies and coach each other around moving this to their boards; but it also creates a culture shift in which leaders encourage each other to take time off, rest, and honor their vacations and sabbaticals, instead of being in a negative competition of martyrdom—which is how we found the ecosystem as we entered it (the **collaborative** level).

This decolonization also allows leaders to jointly tackle the barriers to taking sabbatical leave, such as lack of funding or of interim/senior leadership who can run the organization in an executive director's absence. Since we started having

these conversations in TLC, we have seen a marked increase in BIPOC-led organizations adopting sabbatical policies, and local philanthropy responding with some new sabbatical funding streams.

TLC has also created fellowship cohorts to invest in senior leaders, directors, and managers, and to deeply support them for interim and future executive leadership roles (the **ecosystemic** level). Additionally, we support the exploration of codirector and other shared leadership models, which can allow for much greater sustainability and support for organizational leaders when done well.

This arc of individual to ecosystemic transformation is our theory of change for truly improving the conditions for BIPOC movement leaders—whether we are tackling fundraising through inequities, lack of sustainability, and burnout; succession and transition planning; conflict and coalition building; staffing and team-building; and any number of other shared leadership challenges.

In addition to improving conditions for leaders and organizations across the ecosystem, TLC's work has translated directly into stronger BIPOC-led coalitions and campaigns that have resulted in tangible organizing and policy wins for our communities—from increasing the minimum wage to winning paid family medical leave for Colorado workers. TLC organically fostered the space for deep trust building, conflict resolution, and creative strategizing among BIPOC organizational leaders outside of the campaign tables. Our fellows were then able to show up to historically White-led ballot measure and legislative policy tables in a united push for more racial equity in campaign leadership, resource distribution, and skills training; greater accountability to organizing groups representing grassroots BIPOC communities; and to stop policy compromises that would disproportionately carve out the most directly impacted BIPOC workers. In both campaigns referenced above, TLC fellows strategized to support each other in taking key leadership positions away from historic White power-brokers instead of fighting each other for control, money, and visibility. As a result, they were able to both shape the outcome of the policy win itself and how the policy was won, leaving a lasting influence on how progressive campaigns are run in our state.



We can create spaces that bridge the challenges of running the organizational vehicles we have inherited with new experiments around structures to hold movement work. . . . This is the level of leadership that is required, and we are here for it.

TLC is emerging from its start-up phase. After running three-year-long leadership fellowship cohorts, we are now 60 leaders and 45 organizations deep in Colorado. As we move into our fourth cohort, we are seeing more organizations sending a second or even third person through TLC as it becomes a rite of passage for leaders in our local movement. We have already witnessed powerful ripple effects from work that has been seeded within the TLC fellowship cohorts; other visions remain latent with possibility until conditions are ripe.

We continue to experiment and learn from much trial and error. Even with promising examples of change, we are still watching our peers burn out, leadership transitions fail, organizations self-destruct, and communities get torn apart by conflict. However, we are committed to the wisdom we have earned through our own personal, political, and organizational journeys: *transformative healing work is essential to getting us from the world that exists to the world we are calling in.* We do this work from the belief that we will hit a tipping point when leaders who truly want to transform our conditions, the ecosystem, and the way we lead reach a critical mass.

In this spirit, we are calling on our movement peers to face our individual and collective shadows. We know from our lived experiences that BIPOC leaders feel tremendous pressure to meet superhuman expectations in our roles. We know there is a healthy debate around the role of social justice organizing and movement-building organizations in creating a space for healing, on top of every other fight we are carrying on our backs. It is not our job to become therapists for our teams or to resolve trauma that is beyond the scope of our organizations' capacities and expertise; however, let us move away from reactionary and scarcity thinking, which leads to feeling like the problems are all on our individual shoulders, and instead move toward collective and interdependent solutions.

We can come together in the spirit of mutual aid to build the types of leadership spaces we need. We can invest in deep

transformative partnerships with local healers, practitioners, and direct-service providers who have become deradicalized and siloed from our work. We can experiment with new organizational models that contain an infrastructure for care. We can bring ancestral, relational, body-/earth-based, and intuitive forms of knowledge to balance the logical, technical, theoretical, and academic forms of knowledge that are important but overemphasized in dominant Western culture. We can create spaces that bridge the challenges of running the organizational vehicles we have inherited with new experiments around structures to hold movement work. We can use the current global conditions of crisis as a unique opportunity to make the radical changes we have been calling for.

This is the level of leadership that is required, and we are here for it. In the words of Lakshmi Nair, 2021–2022 TLC fellow:

At this critical moment, healing is not a choice, it is an imperative. There's no more time left to let petty ego issues hamper our work. There is no healing of the world without healing of self and there is no healing of self without healing of the world. The separation is an illusion. This is what is so powerful about TLC. It brings together the micro- and macro-level healing. I can't imagine any more important work right now, and I'm deeply grateful to be a part of it.

TLC welcomes reflection, feedback, exchange, and support from others who are in this work with us.

TLC is in deep gratitude to the wider community of largely queer and femme BIPOC strategists rooted in lineages of healing and transformative justice, who have offered both loving critiques and potential solutions for our current movement challenges. We especially want to acknowledge some kindred organizations: Standing In Our Power; Coaching for Healing, Justice and Liberation; and Liberatory Leadership Partnership for helping us to develop TLC's framework, curriculum, and overall orientation to the work.

NOTES

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4. This knowledge came out of movement discussions in the mid-2000s, in spaces Neha Mahajan participated in, hosted by such groups as INCITE! (which published *The Revolution Will Not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017]) and Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training. In these discussions, movement elders passed on the oral history of why they had chosen to use nonprofits as vehicles for their work, and debated the unintended consequences of those decisions for present times. For more on this, see Michael Haber, “The New Activist Non-Profits: Four Models Breaking from the Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” *University of Miami Law Review* 73, no. 3 (Spring 2019): 863–954.

NEHA MAHAJAN (she/her) is the daughter of South Asian immigrants, and brings nearly 20 years of experience fighting for social justice. As a young activist, Mahajan developed political consciousness in movements such as immigrant justice, youth organizing, ending violence against women of color, and dismantling the prison-industrial complex. Over the last 15 years, she has led multiple philanthropic and community organizations in the Colorado ecosystem. She has supported a number of local organizing campaigns, from police accountability to housing justice, and played a critical leadership role in building the campaign that won paid family and medical leave for Colorado workers. She also worked at the national level to center the leadership of women of color, invest more deeply in grassroots organizing, and work more intentionally at the intersection of race, class, and gender. Mahajan helped to found Transformative Leadership for Change in 2017, and became coexecutive director in 2020. **FELICIA GRIFFIN** (she/her) has had the privilege to serve in many leadership roles during the last 20 years of working in the nonprofit sector. Griffin has worked on the local, state, and national level to pass policies that provide critical support families need to thrive. She is deeply committed to opening the doors of opportunity for communities and people who have been left out of the “American dream.” Griffin is cofounder and coexecutive director of Transformative Leadership for Change, and president of Sweet Magnolia Consulting.

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The Challenge to Power

by Dax-Devlon Ross

■
Rather than letting people spin in self-indulgent circles of complaint, the justice-centered leader reminds people where they started, how far they have come, and where they are headed and why. In that way, the justice-centered leader reignites a disciplined focus on the prize. Every bit of energy is required for that purpose—because when it is all said and done, that alone is the ultimate accountability measure.

I. THE BLACK LEADER'S BURDEN

In the past three years, many of us who have been advancing justice initiatives have either questioned or outright criticized traditional top-down leadership as one root cause of the perpetuation of structural racism. The Aspen Institute's definition of the term is instructive here. Structural racism “identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with ‘whiteness’ and disadvantages associated with ‘color’ to endure and adapt over time.”¹ The structure of labor is one such “dimension of our history.” Though it has looked different from one epoch to the next, throughout this country's labor history—from chattel slavery to the industrial age to the information age—White men with institutional power and authority have effectively shaped systems both to protect and propel the interests of White people. Thus, those of us doing racial justice work have posed a question that is at the very least worth grappling with: Can we trust an organizational leadership paradigm forged over centuries of oppression to lead us toward liberation, or do we need to reconfigure that model in order to produce different outcomes? We have further asserted that because of the inequitable distribution of access and opportunity that stems from racial capitalism, our leadership teams may not reflect our most qualified or hardest working (the twin pillars of merit) but rather those who were set up and supported to succeed from the beginning (the *sine qua non* of privilege).

The critique has been valuable. It has challenged leaders to look within, ask themselves hard questions, and uncover hidden assumptions that may be implicitly guiding their choices and—perhaps—impeding the progress toward the more just organizations they claim they want to build.

The critique has also, admittedly, been weaponized—often, against leaders of color who are ascending into organizational leadership. Just as these folks are assuming the mantle, they are being met with direct assaults on the established structures and forms of power. In the past three years, I have worked with or spoken to several dozen of these leaders. Nearly all have faced power struggles from within that they didn't anticipate and can't seem to get beyond without considerable time and energy that would otherwise be spent on the job they believed they were hired to perform. In some instances, the challenge presents as a clarity



What seems to be getting lost in the quest to quiet organizational discontent is that many of these young people feel duped. They were sold a vision of “the work” and the organization’s principles that, in the worst cases, turned out to be a complete fabrication.

gap—employees stating that they don’t understand how decisions are made or what their roles are. In other instances, it presents as an accountability and transparency gap—employees asking (in some cases, demanding) to have access to information that may or may not be relevant to their job. And in yet others, the gap employees believe the organization needs to close is one of proximity—those closest to the work or who share certain identities with those the mission seeks to serve should make, or at least be deeply involved in, key decisions.

The challenge to power has also presented as a *de facto* coup d’état: a discontented band of employees who have felt burned by leadership no longer have faith in its capacity to lead. And since they have no formal means of airing grievances, they push back—on everything. They seek to unionize. They go directly to the board. They engage in creative forms of sabotage. In whichever way the problem presents itself on the surface, however, once consultants like me start asking questions and analyzing data, the fundamental challenge to power—who has it, who should have it, how should it be structured and exercised—eventually reveals itself.

And while some leaders can and have categorically shut down these challenges to power, Black leaders, in my experience, haven’t had that luxury. For one thing, no self-respecting Black person wants to be considered an enabler of White supremacy within their organization. Being labeled as such is the modern equivalent of the Uncle Tom, house negro, and sellout trope. I don’t know about you, but those are *fightin’* words where I come from. Not only that, but the patronizing tone in which these assaults are typically packaged also assumes that the leaders are either naive or craven, when, in fact, the Black leaders I have worked with are crystal clear about who they are and what their ancestors endured. And while they know that the “merit” game they had to master in order to get to a position of power can be a fraught, flimsy gift used by guilty hearts to defend a rigged system, from their vantage point it remains the only practical means to accessing the institutional power to effect real change. Yet, even as they are fully aware of all of this and more, they accept that no matter how qualified they are for the role they were hired to perform,

the true litmus test of their leadership will be whether and to what extent they wielded power in a just manner—a moving target that is dependent upon who is judging at that moment. So, as much as they may want to unleash their scorched-earth inner voice—and they do—they listen, nod, and, most of all, keep their facial expressions in check.

I call all of this *the Black leader’s burden*—and those who are in my circle are asking their coaches, therapists, each other, and whoever else will listen one question: *How do I engage with this challenge to power without burning up or out?*

II. RETHINKING POWER ARRANGEMENTS

All of this is to say, the sudden influx of new Black leaders has not been met with the open arms of staff that many of us expected. In many instances, the arrival of a new ED/CEO just made the staff more anxious, the problems more pronounced, and the leaders themselves more uncertain.

Younger employees—the “entitled malcontents” who everyone my age and above insists are hung up on identity politics—at least understand something that those in leadership roles seem to be conveniently misremembering from their own youth: identity affinity alone is not a salve. However inexperienced and/or entitled staff may be, my interactions with younger staff members have consistently shown me that they are sophisticated enough to know that just because one shares a historically oppressed identity does not mean one shares the same values or vision for justice. What seems to be getting lost in the quest to quiet organizational discontent is that many of these young people feel duped. They were sold a vision of “the work” and the organization’s principles that, in the worst cases, turned out to be a complete fabrication. Once inside, they uncovered incoherent—sometimes nonexistent—systems and structures. They found themselves unclear about their roles, having been hired for one job yet doing another. They discovered that they were expected to go above and beyond without additional compensation or paid time off. And the values the organization trumpeted on their website—transparency and accountability? Well, turns out they were still working on that.

As tempting as it may be, the role of leaders facing calls from their people for participation/inclusion, transparency, and accountability is not to stamp out, bad-mouth, or label such calls “impractical.” The onus is squarely on leaders . . . to engage with the challenge to power.

As a result, they lost trust and started demanding that leaders establish explicit systems and processes. And they have expectations—and having an actual say in decisions about the work that impacts them sits right at the top of their list.

How this could come as a shock to anyone is strange to me. Long before COVID-19 and George Floyd, things were not okay in a lot of organizations. In some cases, call-outs were long overdue. So, to the leaders who felt/feel ambushed and pounced on, I ask, “What were you expecting?” Hiring a leader who shares a salient identity with the people who have been feeling left out or discriminated against is the oldest hustle in the book (and one that people have good reason to be skeptical of)—and intragroup conflict is nothing new, either.

As tempting as it may be, the role of leaders facing calls from their people for participation/inclusion, transparency, and accountability is not to stamp out, bad-mouth, or label such calls “impractical.” The onus is squarely on leaders—those who are committed to carrying the justice mantle forward—to engage with the challenge to power. As the eminently quotable Jay-Z once rapped: “it’s just the penalty of leadership.”² Thus, the justice-centered leader’s role, as I see it, is to learn how their historical predecessors met or failed to meet the challenge to power in moments of upheaval and change, and figure out how to adapt themselves and their organizations to more fully express the aspirations of racial justice and collective liberation.

When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s executive secretary, Walter White, appointed Ella Baker to direct all of the organization’s branches in 1943, Baker “became the NAACP’s highest-ranking woman.”³ She also inherited a portfolio of sporadically engaged but largely immobilized chapters scattered across the country. From what Baker could gather, the primary function of the chapters was funneling membership dues to a national office increasingly staffed by professional civil rights leaders with their own agendas and ambitions. For their part, the occupants of the national office were content with this relationship: the dues allowed the national headquarters to engage in an advocacy strategy reliant upon public relations

and court battles to eventually change the legal status of Black Americans. Baker believed that the chapters needed to be activated, and she set about transforming them into semiautonomous direct-action units that spontaneously mobilized around local and state issues of concern.

Baker began training local leaders—Rosa Parks, among them—to be activists. She started recruiting in pool halls and bars. Even though her efforts increased membership, her underlying belief in distributed power brought her into conflict with the NAACP leadership. Baker eventually fell out of favor and left the organization, but the resistance she encountered at the organization persisted into the next decade.⁴

As difficult as it is to grasp today, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the direction and goals of the racial justice movement were a matter of serious debate. Following World War II, African Americans began joining trade unions en masse.⁵ As they did, many became politicized; so, they began pushing for economic and social policies that would end discrimination and redistribute resources to the masses at home and abroad. Holding socialist or communist views was not yet considered anti-American; in fact, Ben Davis, an official member of the American Communist Party, won a city council seat in Harlem. But Black radicalism’s critique of colonialism, capitalism, and Jim Crow–style White supremacy ran afoul of the Cold War fever infecting the country. To protect itself from being labeled a communist front and jeopardizing its 501(c)(3) status, NAACP leadership purged leftists from its ranks and actively aided the State Department and FBI in a smear campaign against prominent Black leftists—Paul Robeson being its most prominent victim. It stood aside as the government harassed suspected Black radicals, stripping them of jobs on spurious charges of treason, confiscating their passports under dubious claims that they threatened democracy, and sentencing them to prison under bogus laws like the Smith Act—convictions which the Warren Court later overturned or ruled as unconstitutional. By the middle of the 1950s, Black radicals had been driven out of public view.⁶

The NAACP’s strategy paved the way for Eisenhower’s Department of Justice to formally back the NAACP’s *Brown v. Board*

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of Education petition before the Supreme Court;⁷ it also established a blueprint for racial justice movements: going forward, in order to win the support of elites who broadly supported diversity and who tended to populate nonprofit boards, the goal of racial justice had to be framed as full access and opportunity within the existing order of things, not structural change to the underlying systems that enabled discrimination.

So, what is the lesson here?

I do not question that the NAACP of the Cold War era paved the way for the modern-day racial justice movement. Faced with unprecedented pressure to prove its loyalty to the government or perish, it chose collective preservation. Sadly, one of its unflattering legacies is the notion that internal differences regarding the direction of the movement must be silenced; only certain visions for change are to be given quarter. As the inheritors of the racial justice legacy, contemporary justice-centered leaders who are being challenged by their people to shift power would do well to situate that challenge within this continuum. The struggle for power is not an aberration; ours is as much a history of conflict as it is communion. To put it bluntly: We fight. We disagree. Yet that disagreement pushes our shared quest for liberation forward. Martin Luther King Jr. studied, cited, and built parts of his own philosophy on the historical materialism commonly attributed to the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.⁸ Hegelian dialectics asserts that growth is the process and product of struggle between competing visions. Through conflict comes improvement.

I offer this perhaps unpopular perspective because the challenge to power that Black leaders are facing is being increasingly characterized as a—even *the*—problem rather than a symptom. But hear this: The “woke” rhetoric that conservatives have collectively dog-whistled to signal their disgust? It’s now being adopted by the left. Progressives are being derided as utopian dilettantes at every turn. It has become fashionable to come across as a “reasonable,” “sensible” pragmatist and pontificate about how “these things take time” and “maybe, in our haste to make amends to Black people for past wrongs amid the 2020 racial reckoning, we

overcorrected by adopting impractical antiracist policies.” Thus, those outspoken employees who express disagreement or push organizations and their leaders to be in alignment with the values they tell the world they believe in (by practicing, for example, a form of democratic decision-making) are being labeled “radical extremists,” “emotionally immature troublemakers,” all sorts of names that may have some legitimacy but are also being used to obscure some truths, avoid a deeper dissection of the social sector, and fend off important introspection overall. I see it, I hear it: the relieved sense among leaders that the rabble are being cleared out so that they can finally lead without distraction.

In the thaw, it’s important that leaders not be seduced by an absence of open dissent. The NAACP of the 1940s and 1950s leveraged democratic forms—the language, ideals, and symbolism of egalitarian democratic institutions—yet ordinary, dues-paying members could not vote for national leadership.⁹ Nor did they have a seat at the table when strategic decisions that would impact millions of lives, including their own, were being decided. Inasmuch as the organization proudly presented itself to the world as the face of change, its priorities and values were largely shaped by the agendas of government agencies, private foundations, and wealthy individuals who had their own beliefs about how the world works and the role Black folks should play in it. And while we have a landmark case to look back on with pride, we should also ask what we sacrificed—and, in light of the resegregation of American schools, whether that sacrifice was necessary to get what we deserve.

What I believe to be true is that the reckoning opened long-overdue lines of communication between leadership and the people they lead within the social sector. It put the question of who should decide and on what basis out into the open and on the table. It gave space for the question of power to be explored. Now, anyone aspiring to formal, mainstream social sector leadership in the post-BLM era has to expect and be prepared for the rank and file to challenge them by raising concerns over workplace inequities that they perceive, pushing for transparency around decisions that impact their work, and seeking clarity when boundaries are blurry.

This is difficult work. It demands experimentation, patience, and a tolerance for prolonged ambiguity—even for repeated failure.

III. JUSTICE-CENTERED LEADERSHIP

The justice-centered leader understands that chronic distrust is the context and condition in which people are living their day-to-day lives. People witnessed the raw hypocrisy of January 6. They are now watching corporations renege on racial justice pledges and governments pass laws to restrict everything from Black voter participation to Black history. The murder of unarmed Black men by law enforcement continues unabated. White supremacy has placed many people on edge, bracing for the next assault. Therefore, the leader who is facing a challenge to power and who hopes to productively engage with conflict first seeks to establish a sense of safety. They do this by being *vulnerable* and *clear*.

By openly acknowledging their own uncertainties—that they don't have all of the answers; that they, too, are bewildered by the world's events; that they don't know exactly what a different set of relational arrangements can look like or if they are ready to embrace such a thing if it were presented—and asking for help, the leader effectively removes themselves from the traditional role of the all-knowing authority figure. They join their people in the work; and in so doing, the leader restores a basic belief within people who have been systematically excluded, lied to, let down, and betrayed that they are seen, they are wanted, and they matter.

The justice-centered leader also prioritizes being clear with their people. They know that in the absence of clarity, people create their own realities, filling in the gaps with their own story lines. The justice-centered leader also knows that White supremacy thrives on ignorance and confusion, so they make it their business to be clear. They are explicit about where they are seeking consensus, compliance, or commitment; they name who has decision rights and how decision-making functions; they make sure that people understand their role, what is expected of them, and what will happen if expectations are not met; and they draw clear boundaries. These leaders do whatever is necessary to ensure that their people—too often and too easily disqualified from opportunities because no one took the time to just be honest with them—have the information they need not only to succeed but also to decide if this is the right place for them.

This is difficult work. It demands experimentation, patience, and a tolerance for prolonged ambiguity—even for repeated failure. In my practice, I am observing some leaders making more progress than others. These leaders share a set of common traits. First, *they are legitimately grappling with the challenge of staff asking to decentralize power*; second, *they are searching for ways to close the gap between decisions and those affected*; third, *they are recognizing the critical need to realign their people with the mission*. It is still too early to tell whether their efforts will result in lasting organizational change, not to mention greater impact—but these leaders are at least leaning in. And, as they do, what they are modeling and enabling has the potential to shift our shared understanding of how a leader is supposed to act and what a leader is supposed to do when faced with a challenge to their power.

I confess that these are just starting points—building blocks and first drafts drawn from the small sample size that is my consulting work—yet, from what I have observed, they are making a difference. Collectively, I call these three starting points “justice-centered leadership practices.”

1. Getting more proximate to the work

In 2018, I heard New Profit's Tulaine Montgomery give a talk on proximate leadership that shifted my consciousness. What she said was at once profound and intuitive: people who hold power need to be more proximate to the problems they are trying to solve. It is as simple as that. And yet, the number-one problem many organizations face when attempting to reimagine their structure is their own internal, self-created bureaucracy. In a quest to grow the mission, organizations hired managers. Now they have managers of managers of managers. Each time, the people doing the work—often, young Black folks and other people of color—were pushed further down the organizational chart. The result is that the managers of the most significance—those who lead the teams who do the most essential work—are often far removed from decision-making spaces that affect the work. They only speak to the power center through intermediaries, whose incentives may not be aligned with mission or impact.

Once the justice-centered leader becomes aware of the gulf between themselves and the work, they seek to close it. This can happen a number of ways, but what I have witnessed and

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been most impressed by are leaders making the difficult decision to eliminate layers of organizational bureaucracy so they can get closer to the work. This shift is not for the faint of heart. Eliminating roles and people who may be cherished within an organization creates wounds and triggers grief that must be attended to. But where the leader focused on equity may get stuck trying to be fair to everyone, the leader centered on justice is called—simply and purely—to right past wrongs. Any obstacle getting in the way of that has to be removed. By closing the power gap between themselves and their most critical people, by bringing them into the room and making sure they have a seat at the table, the justice-centered leader builds stronger lines of communication, deepens bonds of trust and mutuality, and, ultimately, ensures that those closest to the wrongs are also closest to the power and resources to right those wrongs.

2. Enabling shared solutioning

I was working with a new leadership team, when it became clear that they didn't know their purpose. Why had the CEO, a woman of color new to the role, formed the team in the first place? When I asked if they knew what their purpose was, there was no clear consensus; nor was there any about what authority they had. Most of the leaders in the room—upper-middle managers, for the most part—considered it a clarity problem. I saw something different. I had witnessed the CEO ask them for help in designing the team. The CEO had heard their request for more “shared leadership,” and wanted to honor that by creating a space for them to define what shared leadership looked like and meant. The CEO could not have been clearer—the team just didn't know how to react to the ask. They were shell-shocked. Because prior leadership had made major decisions in an echo chamber, the managers in the room didn't believe that the new CEO really wanted to share power. Thus, the group was choosing self-preservation, and that meant waiting to be told what to do.

Based on what I was observing and what I knew coming in, the only time the group came together was to protest narrow-minded, short-sighted decisions made by prior leadership. The group wasn't comfortable—or, quite frankly, experienced—operating as a group of proactive, problem-

solving leaders. This is indicative of a paradox I have encountered across the sector: many of us know the organizations that we don't want to be part of, know how to blame management for making decisions we don't like, but we get stuck when it comes to crafting what we want. Perhaps we are afraid to take power and/or have a conflicted relationship with power. Perhaps we are so used to pushing back and fighting *against*, that many of us legitimately haven't built the muscle or tolerance for the shared decision-making and solutioning—the democracy—that we believe and hope will propel our work forward.

This is where reaching into the past becomes vital. The conferences that Ella Baker organized for NAACP chapters in the 1940s and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) members in the 1960s were designed to build group capacity for organizing. Baker understood that organizing is a skill and that it requires actual abilities and knowledge—not just rhetoric. Therefore, these were strategy spaces, growth spaces, problem-solving spaces. People left these conferences connected and inspired, yes—but they also left knowing how to do new things to advance the movement.

The justice-centered leader recognizes that inasmuch as people *believe* they are ready to engage in democratic processes, it is likelier than not that the group needs to develop the capacities—both relational and technical—to pull it off successfully. Moreover, they understand that the best way to mend wounds is through the work. Thus, they set up or authorize situations that disrupt the normal way of operating. Shared learning that enables the group to embody shared leadership is one such disruption. In the instance described above, we spent two days together wading through an iterative process of naming, sorting, sifting, arguing, voting, and assigning. In the final analysis, the group was able to hold disagreement without imploding, achieve consensus within a defined time frame, and accept nonclosure without feeling as though they had failed to make legitimate progress. By the time we returned to our regularly scheduled lives, the group had defined next steps and who would be in charge of what.

Notably, this kind of collective work can be especially important in the hybrid work environment, in which not all staff are

The justice-centered leader recognizes that the loss of deep civic engagement with communities and the rise of deep-pocketed do-gooders pose an ethical problem.

local. It facilitates semistructured interactions among people whose job functions may not bring them into regular contact. It allows people to talk directly with the CEO/ED, whom they might otherwise not hear from except over email or through intermediaries. Thus, it punctures silos and allows those who feel isolated to connect and contribute in ways that go beyond their day-to-day job function.

3. Making yourself accountable to the community

In a 2001 essay, “Associations Without Members,” Harvard sociologist Theda Skocpol traces civic America’s transformation from one powered by scores of large, volunteer-led associations in post–World War II to one powered by wealth, access, and professional training by the late 1990s. The initial catalyst of the transformation, argues Skocpol, was the Civil Rights movement.¹⁰ She wrote, “Inspired by civil rights achievements, additional ‘rights’ movements exploded”—during what she termed “the long 1960s” (“mid-1950s through the mid-1970s”)—“promoting equality for women, dignity for homosexuals, the unionization of farm workers, and the mobilization of other nonwhite ethnic minorities. Movements arose to oppose U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam, champion a new environmentalism, and further a variety of other public causes. At the forefront of these groundswells were younger Americans, especially from the growing ranks of college students and university graduates.”¹¹

While member-led associations continue to exist and be relevant players, it is hard to dispute that today’s nonprofit sector—the direct descendant of the peculiarly American voluntary spirit first detected by Alexis De Tocqueville in the nineteenth century—has untethered itself from meaningful accountability to the communities and people it claims to serve. This isn’t to say that organizations are indifferent to community; it is to say that what exists—in place of the thousands upon thousands of people who at one time might have composed a given association’s constituency, paid membership dues, bought its newsletters, determined its actions, and voted on its leaders—are largely unaccountable networks of paid staff, boards, and donors. Social entrepreneurs can “sell” ideas to address social problems on spec without any substantial support from any community or

relevant background experience. They only need a 501(c)(3) seal and an entity or individual—perhaps themselves—who is willing to fund the project.

The justice-centered leader recognizes that the loss of deep civic engagement with communities and the rise of deep-pocketed do-gooders pose an ethical problem. They understand that they undermine the values of democratic citizenship. Moreover, they see the danger of dependence on elites and their institutions to drive the radical social changes that are necessary to create a just society.

This is a dilemma with no quick answers. But leaders are experimenting with new strategies to create more accountability. Some are establishing youth councils or designating spots on their boards for community members. These are all solid starting points.

One very promising approach to closing the accountability gap that I have seen up close is participatory action research—a formal process and practice of engaging people to investigate their own problems. Last summer, I was hired by an executive director of a foundation, a Black woman, to steward a strategic planning process led by 18 members of the community. The members were predominantly people of color and immigrants who had never before participated in anything like this. The foundation compensated them for their time; if they needed childcare or transportation support, the foundation made sure it was provided. The strategic planning team, not the board, designed the research questions, identified other community members to speak with and learn from, conducted the research, reviewed the research findings, and, ultimately, selected the organization’s strategic priorities.

The entire process posed an immense risk for the leader. *What if the strategy team came up with priorities that the foundation didn’t know how to advance? What if the board didn’t buy in? What if donors disapproved of the new direction?* To their credit, the leader accepted the possibility of all these outcomes and moved forward anyway. The leader was committed to serving the community; if that meant losing supporters or having to learn new skills, then so be it. It was more important to align and anchor the foundation to the

people in whose name it claimed to be operating than to exist at the pleasure of a handful of well-intentioned individuals.



The justice-centered leader has internalized these lessons. They are fully aware that we are steeped in systems that need to be rehabilitated or abolished. They recognize the need for accountability and repair. They also know that, if indulged, people will deplete themselves and their organizations fighting the wrong battles with the wrong people. Accordingly, the leader makes space to validate all the truths that their people are naming about the internal structures and processes that should be attended to *without letting*

any of it become an excuse for not doing the important work they have been called to do. Thus, they absorb the hard feedback they are receiving and channel it productively, asking: *What does this mean for our work? How does doing this get us closer to achieving our goals? How does this improve people's material conditions?* Rather than letting people spin in self-indulgent circles of complaint, the justice-centered leader reminds people where they started, how far they have come, and where they are headed and why. In this way, the justice-centered leader reignites a disciplined focus on the prize. Every bit of energy is required for that purpose—because when it is all said and done, that alone is the ultimate accountability measure.

NOTES

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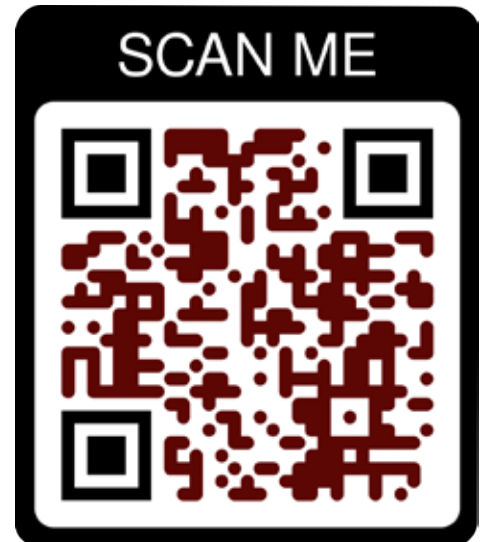
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What Is Needed Now

by Linda Nguyen

In today's tumultuous climate—global political turmoil; emboldened White supremacists; mass gun violence; environmental degradation; pandemics; lack of access to quality, affordable healthcare; and counting—we need leadership that can grapple with the challenges. Nonprofits play a critical role in organizing communities and advocating for better policies to face these crises, and we must now assess what we are looking for in our colleagues and ourselves. If we are to move the needle on changing systems, structures, and policies to benefit all people and the planet, we need the right people in the right organizations building mass movements for change.

But at Movement Talent, a nonprofit recruitment organization that works with a majority of BIPOC and other individuals from underrepresented communities, we are seeing that, post-COVID, position-vacancy rates continue to be an issue for the organizations we represent. Organizations, like society at large, are facing fundamental paradigm shifts. In the wake of the multiple external crises, some are trying hard to come to grips with changing expectations in the workplace—as evidenced,

■
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Movement work is not simply intersectional—it's chockablock. External crises are stacked on top of internal crises, and for many in the movement space, the work feels unrelenting.

for example, by the proliferation of nonprofit staff unions. Efforts have been made to address DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) practices, improve compensation and benefits, incorporate wellness, and make more space for all staff to share their opinions on organizational matters—but in a number of cases, such efforts have been shallow, and many organizations have become fraught with (more-often-than-not hidden) internal conflicts. In such a climate, job seekers are, understandably, hesitant to make a move.

Movement work is not simply intersectional—it's chockablock. External crises are stacked on top of internal crises, and for many in the movement space, the work feels unrelenting and lacking in the psychic rewards that may have kept some motivated prior to the last few years of tumult. The issues we are collectively combating aren't just present in our organizing and advocacy work 9 to 5—we are often experiencing them acutely and personally at home, within our families and communities. Over the past three years, more than one million Americans *each month* have called in sick.¹ On top of that, there is the increased isolation of many people, with once in-person organizations now going remote-first. It's caused a tidal wave of new problems in the workplace around coordination, solidarity, and effective teamwork—and not many guide maps exist around how to deal with it all.

TRENDS AND OBSERVATIONS

At Movement Talent, we have supported more than fifty organizations (from grassroots organizing groups and unions to PACs, philanthropic institutions, and more) with key hires—mostly mid- and senior-level roles. What we have observed over the past three years is that the climate has fundamentally changed people's interactions and motivations within the workplace as well as the types of individuals looking for roles. We are seeing many more applicants than usual wanting to switch sectors and transition to doing social justice work, and we are seeing many more applicants than usual looking first and foremost for the roles that provide the most flexibility. Some key observations:

People are dealing with—and attending to—multiple forms of trauma, depression, and anxiety. There is more acceptance now for people to share the challenges they are facing—

whether personal, mental, physical, or emotional—and that sharing often crosses over into the workplace. So, whether the levels and types of trauma (for example, workplace trauma) have always been there yet have never been spoken about freely or whether trauma is on the rise in real numbers is something we are examining. What is clear, via self-disclosure, is that we are interacting with many individuals who have experienced high levels of trauma.

It is an honor for us to work with so many people from so many different backgrounds, and we are here to support individuals in their professional journeys. We present this observation as a way to prepare and encourage organizations, too, to develop ways to accept, embrace, and support people on their healing journeys. These healing journeys don't need to be organization-provided experiences; however, it must be acknowledged that some individuals will need to undertake healing processes while working at your organization.² Organizations must also be mindful not to create additional trauma, which can happen when our workplaces lack clear communication about roles, responsibilities, expectations, and boundaries.

People are more and more looking for remote work. There is a tug-of-war going on between remote work and every other kind of work.³ In particular, there is resistance from staff and prospective applicants about in-field or in-office requirements for roles that do not in fact *need* a staff member to be in the field or in the office. Some organizations are losing out on applicants due to their having requirements for staff to be in the office at least some of the time (hybrid, limited-remote) or 100 percent of the time. On average, when we are asked to recruit for two similar roles (similar experience, qualifications, salary)—but one remote, the other not—we get double the number of applicants for the remote position, no matter how much or little in-person time is required (limited/hybrid basis, and so on).

If given the choice between more or less flexibility for roughly the same type of job, most applicants will choose the option with more flexibility. Some very talented folks, seemingly great fits for the in-person roles, are looking elsewhere. This disadvantages direct-organizing and region-specific roles

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while being advantageous for remote national roles and remote operational and administrative roles.⁴ And for some unions, there is a solidarity principle at play: “If our members are expected to show up at their jobs, why should we have different expectations for ourselves?”

At Movement Talent, we see this kind of principle across the board as a unique recruitment opportunity (not just for unions but also, for example, for a rooted community-based organization that feels that its physical presence in the community is essential to its mission, and sees that as being in solidarity with the members it represents). And we believe that clarity is key—it allows the organization to attract individuals with that same kind of orientation and helps those who differ to look elsewhere.

The unique recruitment opportunity lies in the ability of the organization to articulate those values aloud, even up front in a job announcement. Listing a position as “In-office M–F required” reads differently from “In solidarity with the members we represent—the majority of whom are retail, service, and airport workers going to work every day to provide essential services—our staff work out of our three offices located in the largest counties in the state.” That said, solidarity comes in all shapes and forms, and for people who, for example, are immunocompromised, solidarity may mean keeping as many people at home as possible!

People are pushing back against working beyond their salaried hours. Workers, regardless of generation, have increasingly drawn boundaries that more clearly and cleanly separate work and their personal and family lives. We’ve noticed this trend at all age levels as workers collectively argue, “Good boundaries do not mean I lack a work ethic—I work my ass off.” They are looking realistically at the cost of living, noting when a posted salary range is just not going to cut it, and declaring that they are not going to work day and night or weekends without additional compensation. What we hear from employers in response to the pushback is, “The issues we work on are not 9 to 5. We need people to understand that reality.” So, we encourage organizations to outline this carefully in their job descriptions (with real and accurate

estimates) so as to make clear from the outset what is expected of staff. The nonprofit sector has spent a lot of time and energy over the years talking about burnout and ways to avoid burnout among staff—and both the older and the younger generations are trying to take this advice!

People still want to maintain culture and camaraderie. For many organizations, the move to remote-first or online versus in-person engagement has put a strain on culture building. The ability of people to gather in person, create bonds, and develop friendships has been dramatically impacted due to the pandemic and its ensuing restrictions. What we are left with is trying to figure out ways to build culture over Zoom. Some groups have made tremendous strides in this arena, but overall it has left some people feeling isolated, not “part of something larger than myself,” and needing real-time connection. And for organizations seeking to build movement—whether for policy/systems change or to grow a great idea—the lack of in-person connection can be very challenging.

BRIGHT SPOTS

As we take stock of what the moment is bringing us and the inherent challenges the realities present, we reflect too on who is meeting the moment in ways that can provide some inspiration for many of us still trying to gain a footing in this new world.

Just as we heard about folks coming out of the pandemic thriving in new and unexpected ways—newly attending to their health, developing more meaningful relationships with family members, learning a new craft—we are seeing a crop of leaders who started new roles within the last three years and seem to be thriving, notwithstanding the challenges. From our observation, backed by one-on-one interviews with individuals, we’ve gleaned some key characteristics that successful leaders in this moment all seem to possess:

- 1. A high sense of self-awareness.** Self-awareness is a concept often brought up in interview settings (whether directly, in the interview, or as an evaluative point after an interview: “How self-aware do you think

Last year, we read Maurice Mitchell's seminal piece on building resilient organizations, which includes terrific guidance for progressive organizations and the people who work with and for them. The tendencies Mitchell points out that hold us back, and the orientations we require in order to get back on the path together, are all examples of the need to hold infinite complexities.

this person is?"). Why is self-awareness important in a job? We see this as a trait that almost all employers look for, because they seek colleagues who can regulate how they work with others, who can determine when collaboration would be beneficial or not, and who are able to be realistic—about possibilities, volume of work, and assessing talent, to name a few standouts. The individuals we see doing well in this time are self-aware and understand what role they play in an ecosystem. (A great tool for those interested in learning more about this is Deepa Iyer's "social change ecosystem framework," which helps to "clarify values, [and] identify roles."⁵)

- 2. The ability to hold infinite complexities.** Last year, we read Maurice Mitchell's seminal piece on building resilient organizations, which includes terrific guidance for progressive organizations and the people who work with and for them.⁶ The tendencies Mitchell points out that hold us back, and the orientations we require in order to get back on the path together, are all examples of the need to hold infinite complexities. We see this ability in the leaders who are navigating this moment well—they are challenged by multiple truths, by the human tendencies of contradiction and hypocrisy—and they hold all those truths and contradictions when making decisions or taking actions. One leader I've observed doing this extremely well, recently described a situation in which a colleague was not performing at the expected level. The leader explained the ways in which this was impacting the leader's own work and the direct consequences it was having, or would have, on the community they served, while at the same time straightforwardly and with genuine empathy discussed the challenges the colleague was facing. It is a tricky and often fraught dynamic, this holding of empathy while also demanding that our efforts produce change.
- 3. Internal fountains of motivation.** The personal stories of these successful leaders share some common themes, including events that, and people who, have made huge positive impacts on their lives and provide them with great sources of motivation. A number of these individuals recounted powerful stories involving family members and mentors who influenced them with their hard work and words of wisdom and guidance. This kind of motivation strikes me as different from that of a new staff member in a new position hoping for internal recognition and/or power; instead, the motivation is rooted in stories that themselves are rooted in hope, compassion, strength, difficulty, struggle, and real change.
- 4. A lack of concern vis-à-vis external validators or detractors.** Another major prevailing characteristic includes minimal concern about what others might be saying about them—whether positive or negative—and more focus on their work responsibilities. This is, admittedly, difficult in today's world, where feedback and input are placed on a pedestal and public scrutiny is high (and Twitter fingers are loose). Being in senior-level, high-profile roles, such individuals will likely be used to a plethora of both critiques and accolades. The ability to be unbothered by the noise speaks to focus—and it also speaks to a balanced ego.
- 5. Ease in situations of conflict.** This finding was harder to tease out, as there was not a definitive connecting point in approaches to conflict or even perspectives around healthy versus unhealthy conflict. What we would point to are the diverse work experiences and backgrounds of these individuals, many of whom, in addition to work in the movement space, had had the opportunity to work in different fields/sectors—including early-in-life jobs that involved manual labor, work in service industries, work in corporations, work in government, and work with people of varying

As we continue to find our bearings in these trying times, we find hope and inspiration in the fact that there are people both holding it down and advancing the work—tremendously—on behalf of and with our communities.

educational attainment and incomes. This kind of diverse experience has proven useful in dealing with situations of conflict today. When asked to talk about working through a conflict, all interviewees brought up examples from different fields they had worked in and described a tendency to take an inquisitive approach to conflict and an intention of understanding. There was recognition of the vastness of perspectives as well as demonstration of their own ability to bring parts of what they learned from other sectors into the movement space.

OFFERINGS FOR US ALL

As we continue to find our bearings in these trying times, we find hope and inspiration in the fact that there are people both holding it down *and* advancing the work—tremendously—on behalf of and with our communities. And we meet more of these folks every day.

For individuals seeking new roles and wondering whether what they bring to the table matches what is needed in many organizations in this moment, we close out with some questions that can help to spark self-examination.

If you are someone looking for a new role, what do you want to convey to organizations about yourself to help them see how your background will support their mission? *Questions to ask yourself that will help you get to your answer:*

- Have you done full and expansive work in thinking about what role you want to play?
- Does your vision align with the role you are suited to play?
- Have you done exhaustive self-interrogation about your motivations for pursuing this work—and are those motivations enough to sustain you over the long-term?
- Have you explored what practices you need to integrate into your work, whether spiritual/religious, wellness-centered, healing-centered, or community-building-centered?

Possible Interview Questions to Consider



1. Are there experiences from the first half of your life that have shaped your motivation that you would be willing to share?
2. Is feedback something that is important to you? How do you take in feedback, and what do you do with the feedback that is provided to you (whether you asked for it or not)?
3. Please describe a time you were involved in or brought into a conflict situation. What were some actions you took to ameliorate the situation or support those involved in moving past the conflict?
4. Have you been asked to uphold a policy/standard that you had strong feelings against? If yes, what did you do in that situation?
5. What kind of team role do you most naturally play? Is there another/a different role you would prefer to play?



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If you are building a staff team, have you thought about how important EQ (emotional quotient) is to the role? *Questions to ask yourself that will help you get to your answer:*

- How might you weigh EQ with the core responsibilities of the position?
- Are the questions you are asking in the vetting process allowing you to make a good assessment of the attributes you care about most?
- Which aspects of lived experience are ones you want to home in on specifically, and are there ways you can be respectfully inquisitive about lived experience with potential future staff?

We appreciate everyone's efforts on behalf of justice, equity, and peace, and continue to look to you for good models and examples of leadership.

NOTES

1. Melody Schreiber, "Absence from work at record high as Americans feel strain from Covid," *The Guardian*, January 29, 2023, theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/29/covid-absence-workforce-health-long-covid.
2. See Prentis Hemphill, "Transforming Our Systems, Transforming Ourselves: The Pivotal Role of Healing in Social Change Work," *Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2022): 114–19.
3. The following report—not nonprofit-specific—notes that there are about 120 percent more applicants for remote roles. This tracks with our own experience at Movement Talent: Datapeople, *Hiring in a Distributed World* (New York: Datapeople, 2022).
4. Direct organizing roles, which might necessitate staff to interact with community members in person—in meeting halls, at places of faith, before the city council, on the streets—are disadvantaged. In our work, region-specific/local-level roles are more likely to be in-person as well—and not just for organizers. The national groups that once had headquarters and fewer people directly in the field on a regular basis make up the overwhelming majority of organizations going remote-first.
5. Deepa Iyer, "Frequently Asked Questions," The Social Change Map, accessed February 22, 2023, socialchangemap.com/framework.
6. Maurice Mitchell, "Building Resilient Organizations: Toward Joy and Durable Power in a Time of Crisis," *NPQ, The Forge*, and *Convergence*, November 29, 2022, nonprofitquarterly.org/building-resilient-organizations-toward-joy-and-durable-power-in-a-time-of-crisis/.

LINDA NGUYEN is the executive director of Movement Talent, a nonprofit recruitment and talent organization she founded in 2020. Nguyen previously served as the first talent director for Community Change. Before that, she worked closely with frontline human services groups across the United States to build their civic engagement capacities. In her work, Nguyen most enjoys helping people find their *ikigai* (reason for being).

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About the Artist: Carla Jay Harris

Carla Jay Harris was born in Indianapolis, IN. Having been raised traveling the globe as the child of a military officer, her social and artistic development was impacted tremendously by the geopolitical and natural environments she encountered. Harris fervently believes that space (physical and physiological) has a fundamental, lasting impact on personal identity. While the environment around us is constantly evolving, photography has the power to capture humanity in a place, in a moment, transforming a flicker in time into a lasting, appreciable statement.



Harris's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally in: New York; Los Angeles; Washington, DC; Miami; New Orleans; Las Vegas; Paris; and Quebec. She completed undergraduate coursework at the School of Visual Arts, New York, and she received a bachelor's degree with distinction from the University of Virginia and an MFA from UCLA. She currently lives and works in Los Angeles. Her works are included in the collections of the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA; USC Fisher Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; the California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Escalette Permanent Collection of Art, Chapman University, Orange, CA; the Museum of Art and History, Lancaster, CA; the Sherbrooke Museum of Fine Arts, Quebec, Canada; and Johns Hopkins University Law School, Baltimore, MD—and in the corporate collections of General Mills, Creative Artists Agency, Meta, and LA Metro. Harris is represented by Luis De Jesus Los Angeles (www.luisdejesus.com). *All images courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles.*



Recentering Philanthropy toward Social Justice

A Conversation *with* Cyndi Suarez *and* Isabelle Leighton

■ “People of color with wealth are an untapped power source.

This is an experience that a lot of people who have been participating in philanthropy for decades are unaware of—the lived experiences of people of color with wealth and the type of philanthropy that they have contributed over decades. It looks different. It’s not institutional. It doesn’t fall within the same political ideological frameworks that are presented within a lot of the traditional philanthropy.”

In this conversation between Cyndi Suarez, NPQ’s president and editor in chief, and Isabelle Leighton, executive director of Donors of Color Network and former founding director of Equality Fund, the two leaders discuss how to move the philanthropic sector toward racial and social justice.

Cyndi Suarez: We are experiencing an increase in more explicit forms of racial injustice as racial equity gaps are actually widening along with the wealth gap, which overlap, as I’m sure you know. And I’ve been hearing, recently, from funders of color that our sector appears to be pulling away from funding justice work, especially racial justice, while there’s already a lot of inequity in funding along racial lines. So, in this context, Donors of Color Network comes out into the world and tries to move this mission of really moving the sector toward racial justice and social justice. I’m wondering, What’s your strategy for doing that, in that context?

Isabelle Leighton: I love that you’re starting with a nice and easy question, not like my favorite food or anything! So, this is a great question and something we get asked a lot. One of the things that we try to position and share and put out into the world is that people of color with wealth are an untapped power source. This is an experience that a lot of people who have been participating in philanthropy for decades are unaware of—the lived experiences of people of color with wealth and the type of philanthropy that they have contributed over decades. It looks different. It’s not institutional. It doesn’t fall within the same political ideological frameworks that are presented within a lot of the traditional philanthropy. And a lot of it is just not visible.



“I would say this advocating—being a voice to hold mainstream [philanthropy] accountable—is a role that we play at Donors of Color Network and is a really unique position that we take.”

I think a lot of times when we have the stories of what people of color with wealth, or BIPOC donors, focus on or what they care about, they're not actually acknowledged and legitimized within institutional philanthropy. I'll just share a couple of things. (And I did get a chance to peruse some of your articles, and I have so many questions about the work that you've been focusing on. Just very fascinating.) One of the topics that's come up before and continues to be, I think, misleading is that people of color are not necessarily the most politically minded.

CS: Really? People think that?

IL: Yes. So, for example, this concept that Latinx donors might not necessarily be aligned with social justice values; or that Asian Americans just can't pick a side—are nonpartisan. But actually, if you look at the history of the ways in which these donors have shown up in times of crisis, in times of investing long-term in communities, it may not be called “social justice” philanthropy but their actions and their investments demonstrate that they are focused on that work. And there are countless examples of this, and a lot of it is not recorded in what you would consider more “mainstream” philanthropy, or within (c)(3) giving or nonprofit giving. And that's essentially what we're focused on in our research, in our *Portrait* report: that philanthropy always sounds like someone else.¹ And that there's a sort of legitimacy question and visibility question around what kinds of contributions people of color have made.

So, I would say there are two angles to what you're referring to here with the whole racial justice investment. One, How do we, as people of color with wealth, hold mainstream philanthropy accountable to what type of commitments they're making? There's been a lot of PR and showing up and standing up against anti-Black racism, for example, over the last two years, yet we don't have as much data on how accountable we really have been in philanthropy toward giving in ways that are centered on what Black philanthropy wants to focus on. I know, we have a lot of new Black funds and a lot of organized philanthropy that is not considered the most . . . it's not *institutionalized*; but at the same time, we have a lot of mainstream philanthropy that has not really

shifted its giving to be focused on BIPOC communities. And one of the things that we're able to do at Donors of Color Network is to hold that mainstream philanthropy accountable. And we've done that through our Climate Funders Justice Pledge²; and we've had requests from our members to really look at other spaces of giving for that, and to see if we can develop some partnerships for research and data. So, I would say this advocating—being a voice to hold mainstream [philanthropy] accountable—is a role that we play at Donors of Color Network and is a really unique position that we take.

I think the other piece is that we don't have very many vehicles for multiracial solidarity work—especially not within philanthropy, and especially not led by people of color in philanthropy. So, that is a space that we're hoping to do some thinking, some collective action, on. We've started a little bit of this by creating a couple of collective giving pools since we were founded, in 2019. We created a Power Fund in 2020, where we gave to a variety of different BIPOC-led community groups across the country.³ And then, most recently, we just launched . . . it's almost like a pilot fund. It's called Solidarity Is Power, and it's a fund for multiracial democracy. The idea is that we're grounding ourselves in the desire to create infrastructure for multiracial democracy, so that people of color and voters of color are really centered and resourced over time. And what we heard again and again, in the last few months, while we were trying to figure out what our political strategy could look like, was communities of color saying that the funding dries up when we're not in a cycle year, that there is no off-cycle year for communities of color, we're dealing with issues that are not on the ballot, and we also don't have leaders to choose from that reflect our communities. And so, there's a lot of deeper work that needs to be done.

And those of us who have the lived experience of being people of color who now have financial resources are a very powerful ally for these community groups. We're experimenting and trying to see what ways we can work together. We launched this [Solidarity Is Power] fund very recently, and we're going to test it out, see how it goes, and try to get our members to give into a pooled fund and leverage their

“I saw your *Portrait* report, and it had very interesting findings. The one that really stood out to me was that almost every high-net-worth individual or donor of color you spoke with experienced racial and ethnic bias, and it influenced them to want to fund systemic change.”

relationships to give to more of these groups. And a lot of the members have been political donors in the past but not necessarily aware of all the groups across the country that have this deep civic engagement work that’s really blossoming both on the (c)(3) and the (c)(4) side.

CS: I saw your *Portrait* report, and it had very interesting findings. The one that really stood out to me was that almost every high-net-worth individual or donor of color you spoke with experienced racial and ethnic bias, and it influenced them to want to fund systemic change but they did not know how to effect the changes they wanted to see. And so, in an interview I read, you were talking about this. You said, “Unfortunately, many philanthropic leaders take a scarcity mindset and question BIPOC-led movements’ efficacy, including donors of color”⁴—which made me think of a conversation I had with Shanelle Matthews, who’s the communications director for the Movement for Black Lives. She has been a fellow at NPQ this year, and in an interview I did with her, she talks about this issue of class in the Black community. She says, “People want to be part of the change, but they also have these allegiances to the systems that allow for racism to exist. . . . Undoubtedly, there is a tiny group of Black people with significant wealth who experience the world differently. And while they still face racism like the rest of us, the political outcomes of their unique experiences determine how they feel about these uprisings. So, we saw many Black people on different places on the socioeconomic spectrum participate. Still, wealthy Black people also have the privilege of surrounding themselves with people and experiences that might shrink their exposure to racial bias.”⁵ She talks about this as a real challenge for movement workers to get that funding from the people who want systemic change. So, I’m just wondering, How can those who are working for systemic change and the donors that want to see systemic change come together to actually advance this change and thereby be models of transformative philanthropy toward justice? I’m wondering how that comes up in the work that you do with these donors. Does it come up?

IL: Yes, it does.

CS: How does it close that gap?

IL: There are so many different angles to respond to with this. First of all, because of how philanthropy is organized, there’s a major access issue—not just to people of color with wealth but all people with wealth. So, people who are fundraisers—and I started my career as a fundraiser, so I’ve always been committed to leveraging resources, redistribution of resources, fundraising—really have to have a good analysis of class in order to walk in some of these spaces. A lot of the fundraising that’s happening with some of the biggest dollars come from people who already have money. Peers will fund each other, and they have this clear sense of shared knowledge and understanding. And often, when you start to introduce somebody who has a different type of background, there’s a lot of bias, and that person ends up having to do a lot of the education. And so, I think what you’re speaking to is very complex, because we want to try to simplify it and really focus on the race part, but a lot happens with class. And I think when you talk about fundraising and how to get access to financial resources, you’re already in a particularly oppressive system. And it’s no matter who you’re going to be asking.

CS: You’re saying that’s because of class?

IL: Yes, I would say because of how wealth is organized, right? Because wealth is so aligned with how power gets distributed. And so, in our last retreat—we have a membership retreat where we bring our members together to . . .

CS: How many do you have?

IL: We have 70 members. We have institutional and individual.

CS: They are US based?

IL: All US based. So, we’re really focused on organizing US-based philanthropy. Of course, because we’re people of color, there’s a lot of diasporic giving and relationships that are international. But in that conversation that we had, someone did bring this up—and it was one of the movement allies who was invited to join us and participate in our programming and to develop relationships and access.

“There’s a very specific kind of analysis we have when we’re working in social justice philanthropy, around what’s considered powerful giving or systemic change, that might look a little different when you start to have more of a conversation that’s grounded in the lived experience of people of color.”

CS: You invited someone to come to the retreat?

IL: Yes. We try to create a space where we can develop those relationships, but it did come up. Someone did say, “How do we get access? We don’t even know who these people are. We keep hearing about all these wealthy people of color—how do we develop these relationships?” And it’s challenging, because we are trying to create . . . our organization is intended to be a vehicle to distribute this wealth and distribute these financial resources. But as people of color with wealth, we have a lot of different conversations that we need to get aligned on. And there needs to be a lot of discussion around what our priorities are and how to better align around different issues.

CS: When you say we, you mean donors of color with each other, aligning on how they want to give?

IL: Yes. So . . . when you originally talked about the quote . . . it was actually quite a pattern. So many of those donors felt that they wanted to give to BIPOC-led work but didn’t necessarily have the tools to know where a lot of this work is. It’s not that there isn’t giving already happening; it’s just that the giving is happening outside of nonprofits. It’s happening in communities where there might not be a (c)(3) status. There may be families that people are trying to support, there may be local community groups they’re supporting that are not really institutionalized. Or maybe the issues that some of our members have been invested in don’t fit within the categories of what’s considered so-called “social justice,” right?

CS: Is there something wrong with that pattern of giving?

IL: There’s nothing wrong with it. The purpose, the whole point, is to legitimize it—to be able to make it visible and put it in the context of the culture of giving and how that looks for people of color. Part of what we’re doing is trying to shine a light on what the experience of being donors of color is like. So, for example, we have members who talk about their need to support transnational work, or they have families that are in the diaspora who need support, and they’re struggling to figure out the best ways to give. And they’re not looking for a nonprofit grantmaking vehicle; they’re looking for ways to

invest in, say, businesses that will sustain not only their immediate family but an entire community, because of threats that their families are facing—whether political threats or climate or economic issues. And so, a lot of the questions that people have are, like, “How do I balance what I understand are these movements that are happening and also the needs that I’ve always given to and the issues I’ve always focused on?” And what we’ve done is tried to bring together our members with groups that are leading a lot of this work, and tried to get them to have real conversations and learn from each other. And most of the donors that we have in our network will give directly when they meet these groups, and it’s really just a matter of trying to figure out what the best vehicle is for them to be connected. And there are a lot of ways. There are so many groups, and so many opportunities. Solidarity Is Power is partnering with a platform called Just Fund as a way to start establishing some infrastructure to do that matchmaking work.

I would say there’s a need to have more affirmative stories about people of color and their giving. There’s a need to have a more intersectional approach to thinking about giving. There’s a very specific kind of analysis we have when we’re working in social justice philanthropy, around what’s considered powerful giving or systemic change, that might look a little different when you start to have more of a conversation that’s grounded in the lived experience of people of color. And so—I’ve had this conversation—when you have very frank and direct conversations with people who are fundraising who say that it’s not that they don’t have politically minded members and they’re not willing to give to, for example, Georgia-based civic engagement groups—it’s just that they haven’t interacted with those groups, they don’t know how to get in the same rooms with them—that is a really big challenge. This was an anecdote that I heard from one of our movement allies—that they don’t have any, or very few, people-of-color donors in this Georgia-based group. And we’re like, How’s that even possible? And part of the role here is to say, “How do we connect the people that we’re trying to organize through our relationships and members we’re trying to recruit?” We don’t have any

“We like to say our values are joy, power, and community. And we also say that love is our competitive advantage. It’s really about the dignity and humanity of people.”

members in Georgia right now, but we’re hoping to develop a base there. And say, “What does the relationship-building process look like? What does the donor-education process look like here?” There’s a lot of local philanthropy in Georgia, but it’s not connected to the national spaces in which a lot of us are circulating.

CS: That says a lot. So, can you tell me a little bit more about Donors of Color Network itself?

IL: It was sort of unintentionally founded, in a lot of ways. The founders created this report, this research, where we interviewed—I think it was—140 people of color with wealth, and 113 of the interviews made it into the report that you read. And after the interviews, or as we were doing the interviews, there was this desire to convene these individuals, because they all felt so isolated. And we brought this group together in 2019.

CS: What kinds of people were in this group? “Of color” means what?

IL: So, these are people who have self-identified as people of color and have become a donor or who are intending to give, and so this would be inclusive of younger-generation or next-generation philanthropists who have resources. We were generally saying, a million dollars or above of liquid assets—or this would roughly translate to the ability to give \$50,000 a year.

CS: Self-identifying is definitely a criterion, because a lot of people of color don’t identify that way even though others might identify them that way. So, how did you find them? Through research or through knowing people?

IL: Through the networks of the founders of Donors of Color Network. They have very seasoned practitioners in philanthropy. We have one person who worked in the giving-circle work through Asian American networks and a lot of women’s giving spaces; and we have one person who’s been really focused on political donors and understanding what those networks look like, and also on women-focused spaces. And then we had one person who was focused on LGBTQ giving and had a lot of relationships in that. And so, through their

combined networks, and also asking for recommendations of others who would want to be interviewed. That was how we found them. And the research continues.

We just published this report, but we’d like to figure out ways to do additional reports. We’re doing one that’s based on Bay Area members and donors, because there’s a long history of philanthropy and people of color with wealth in that area. We will probably have other geographic-focused research, as well. But they were based on relationships, and we were very aware of the fact that this was a very small sample size based on who we were able to find. Through the research and looking at census data, we were able to identify that there are over a million people of color with assets over a million dollars. So, it’s quite a small sample size, but it’s actually bigger than any other study.

CS: Interesting. These numbers are so fascinating, just to put some contour to this.

IL: Yes. And, of course, we do acknowledge the gaps. It’s pretty challenging to find certain members and donors who may not hold official or formal positions in certain groups. We leveraged our relationships through institutional philanthropy and through donor networks where people have actually signed on to be part of them. Some business-community giving groups. There are plenty of people who give just through their own personal donor-advised funds, or just through their businesses, who we haven’t reached yet. And so, there’s a whole world of people to recruit.

Going back to your question about what it is that we do and how we are functioning—from the founding, it was just like serendipity, right? Bringing people together, and this desire to say, “Is there a need to have a network?” And it was a resounding “Yes!” It was about 100 people coming together, and we wanted to create a space where the values of the donors were really acknowledged. We like to say our values are joy, power, and community. And we also say that love is our competitive advantage. It’s really about the dignity and humanity of people, and really understanding that when you’re talking about supporting people-of-color- and BIPOC-led movements, that a lot of the work that these groups are doing,

“This is not to say that donors of color are not, or at least our members are not, facing and grounded in our lived experience of the trauma. It’s more that when philanthropy—mainstream philanthropy—talks about needs and injustice, they focus on the problems.”

and that we individually have experienced, is quite traumatic. And a lot of times, the struggle and the pain are what get put front and center in philanthropy without acknowledging how powerful and joyful and resilient our communities are. I think things have shifted a lot in the last few years.

CS: Can you give me an example of what you mean by traumatic? So, you’re saying that when they were looking at what gets funded, they focus on traumatic events? I’m just trying to understand what you mean by *traumatic* in this case.

IL: So, this is more like taking a solutions and affirmative approach to the stories of our communities. I’ll just share from my own personal experience. I went to a Muslim foundation philanthropy event in Dearborn, recently. And before I attended the event, I decided: I’m going to go check out the Charles H. Wright Museum, the African American Museum and permanent exhibit in Detroit—because I had never been, and I don’t know Detroit very well. And what I really loved about that permanent exhibit was that it started from this land of abundance in Africa—the history, and really understanding the full resources of the continent, and the political history—and then put in full context what the forced migration looked like, and how colonization and manufacturing really just put slavery and our history in the United States into hyperdrive. What we focus on in our history is the pain and the suffering of what forced migration and that history look like and what that legacy looks like, but we do not talk about the ways in which political power was gained afterward, post-Reconstruction. We do not talk about the educational leaders and the type of legacy of civil rights and legal expertise that’s within the African American community. We do not talk about how entrepreneurial these communities were, even though they were enslaved—whether it was going to the markets on Sundays to sell goods that they had access to or negotiating with the slave owners to be able to have those days off to spend time together. And the music and the art and just the lived experience of that—that is not centered in the histories when we talk about slavery.

CS: Is that a point of tension between donors of color and movements? I mean, of course, movements have a lot of vision, but there is a lot of dealing with trauma.

IL: Yes. This is not to say that donors of color are not, or at least our members are not, facing and grounded in our lived experience of the trauma. It’s more that when philanthropy—mainstream philanthropy—talks about needs and injustice, they focus on the problems. And they focus on the struggles without really giving access to solutions that are grounded in people who actually had those direct experiences. And so, that idea that people who have suffered the most have the closest access to what the solution should be, is what we are talking about here.

CS: That’s what movement leaders say, too, so I guess they agree on that.

IL: Oh, yes. We’re quite aligned with movement leaders. The tension is not with movement leaders. The tension is with organized philanthropy. The tension is with: How does organized philanthropy decide that they have to distribute what little funding goes to BIPOC communities? That’s the tension.

CS: Systemic change that they want to see that they feel like they don’t necessarily know how to address is with the established philanthropy?

IL: Yes. So, there are a couple of things. One is the story with our Climate Funders Justice Pledge. We were able to recruit 29 foundations to sign on to this pledge to increase their funding to at least 30 percent to BIPOC-led environmental justice movements. But in those conversations, the organizing to get to recruiting these foundations involved a lot of our advocacy. We had to tell the stories of what movement solutions look like, and how they’re very sophisticated, and how it’s about time to give to—to fully fund—communities of color, because the previous ways of funding are not working. And the kinds of questions that we were asked were things like, “How do you know they’re going to work?” And we have to give multiple examples. And so, we realized

that part of our role is to be able to amplify some of these stories and to really be a resource for mainstream philanthropy—to say, “When you’re questioning where you should find BIPOC-led environmental justice groups, here’s a list right here. And here’s a whole bunch of funders who’ve already signed on; you can also talk to them about who they’re giving to.” And so, that’s an example.

CS: So, that’s the kind of work that you do.

IL: Yes, that’s one area. You can think of it two ways, right? One is advocating within philanthropy to center philanthropy on racial equity and justice and to center BIPOC-led work. So, that’s one piece of the work.

CS: And are you hearing the same thing that I’m hearing? Are people more hesitant to fund racial justice now than they were maybe two years ago?

IL: I don’t know if they’re more hesitant; I just don’t know if they were ever really committed. And I think the problem with philanthropy is, it’s very short-term. So, I think sometimes the funding may have come in full force from a few funders—a handful, maybe—and then everybody else. It was sort of like a marketing budget. And I don’t mean to be harsh when I say that—but basically, a lot of foundations didn’t have the pool organized. They just sort of said, “Well, where can we get this money to give out?” And, “Well, this is a rapid need. This is marketing. We’re feeling the need to raise awareness within our”—let’s say—“corporation” or “foundation. Gotta find the money somewhere.” And it came out of a line that wasn’t already organized, wasn’t already identified. And foundations have budgets, too. That’s a thing that people always forget, right? It’s like, Okay, I don’t agree with how the resources are allocated within organized philanthropy or foundations . . . I don’t know how many of these foundations dug deep past their 5 percent distribution . . . I mean, I know there are a few who have. But, in these moments, it was compounded by a pandemic, and we saw people losing their revenue or having to pull back. There were definitely foundations that said, “Oh, we have to pull back on our budgets completely, not just for racial-justice-focused work.” And some foundations never even had a racial justice budget or portfolio. And so, I don’t know if they’ve done the work to try to organize. There are definitely many foundations that have. But you know, that work doesn’t happen overnight. It takes a long time.

So, going back to the issues of organizing. One is advocacy. Advocating within mainstream philanthropy. The other is our own collective work. What does our own collective action look like? And so, that is where I would say we take more of an organizing approach. So, just taking the principles of community organizing and applying them to donor organizing. Our base is people of color with wealth. We have to do the base-building work to recruit, to build alignment. Building alignment is through conversations, relationship building, education. Education is through shared learning, peer-to-peer learning: What are you giving to? This is my understanding of this problem and analysis. This is my lived experience of this problem. And it’s also introducing our members to movement groups, to say, “Hey, here’s a really great group working on reparations. Have you ever wondered how you can give in this area?” “I never gave in this area. Wow, I’m so glad I met these people. Six months later, I made a donation because I signed up for the newsletter and followed up with the executive director.” That kind of thing. Doing that sort of alignment and base building and education.

And, ultimately, I think we’ll be putting together a different collective action, right? It could be that the Solidarity Is Power giving platform is a way for us to test and see how many of our members will give when we create this vehicle. And what are the questions that come up for them when they do make that giving? How much are they going to give? Is this something that we can extend and amplify and use as a recruitment tool? Those are all things that we will be testing. I mean, we’re only three years old. We were founded in 2019—first year of operation was 2020. So, there’s a lot of building to be done. But yeah, that would be, I would say, the way that we’re working. And we’re both a (c)(3) and a (c)(4), so we have a lot of flexibility to do political work. For the most part, our political work has been around aligned giving; so, sharing opportunities with our members and letting them direct their giving to different organizations. And we have had some pooled giving, as well.

CS: Do you have any questions for me?

IL: I think the biggest question I have is, from your vantage point, what is the impact that a group like ours could have in philanthropy? I feel like this is one of those moments when we’re very aware from where we sit—but I know you’ve done a lot of deep thinking. I love what I’ve read so far,

“I’m thinking of the kind of space we’re in now, where there is a higher level of everything, intersectionality across all these different groups. And what leaders of color were telling us is that they need to have knowledge-creation space. So, knowledge creation is something that everyone was asking for. Movement leaders were asking for it. Nonprofit leaders were asking for it. Funders were asking for it.”

especially the things that are a little bit adjacent, like the hierarchy article that you wrote.⁶ I thought that was very interesting and very present right now. But yeah, what kind of impact would you like to see a group like us have?

CS: Well, it’s really interesting, because *NPQ* is, I think, the only media organization in civil society that’s not focused exclusively on philanthropy. And it’s really interesting to me how much philanthropy still wants from us. So, we’ve been really looking into it. I noticed over the past year and a half since I’ve been the editor in chief that the writing has really changed. I think people of color want to speak to philanthropy. I have a lot of philanthropists calling me and saying, “Can you create a program so that I can meet the leaders that you are profiling?” So, for us as an organization, we’re bringing some leaders in philanthropy to the board, because I’m really trying to understand how to do that.

I think what keeps me so hopeful is all the work that’s being done—there’s so much amazing work being done. If I didn’t know about it, I would probably be as discouraged as many people seem to be. But there’s just so much that’s happening, and I’ve been in this work for almost 30 years, and the sophistication! I’ve been in philanthropy. I’ve been in non-profits. I’ve been a consultant. I was a consultant for movements, and it’s just been really developing. So, I’m thinking of the kind of space we’re in now, where there is a higher level of everything, intersectionality across all these different groups. And what leaders of color were telling us is that they need to have knowledge-creation space. So, knowledge creation is something that everyone was asking for. Movement leaders were asking for it. Nonprofit leaders were asking for it. Funders were asking for it. They were telling us, “We need access to the knowledge that we need to do this work well.” So, we shifted at *NPQ* to really look at, What is the knowledge that is needed right now to bring about the society that we want? And so, finding that knowledge and

highlighting it is kind of different than the work that we did before. There’s a lot more that we have to do. For example, we have a VoiceLab program in response to leaders of color asking us to help them develop their voice.⁷ And many leaders, including funders, are asking us for space to develop their voice, because they’ve never been able to do that, to have an authentic voice in their work. That was a yearlong project, where people dug deep into themselves. It was really intense to hear how much people give up to become a leader. So, I think there’s a lot of work around knowledge creation that’s really necessary.

As I listen to you talk, it makes me think that if you were open to it, I would love to do a series. So many people want to get their stories out there. And when they see us doing that, we get even more calls from people who have more stories. I feel that’s really useful to the field. It’s amazing to track all this, to be a space where everyone’s coming at you and you’re convening people who don’t usually talk. I recently met with four philanthropy officers from India and China, who asked, “How do you create an *NPQ*?”

I think of it as knowledge that’s usable. And that tends to be not just new knowledge but also ancient wisdoms that people want to tap back into. I think that that’s really important. I think people now who are in these positions, especially leaders of color, are just really open to new ways to move forward, and want direction, and know that people have direction to give. And I just think that there’s something to some level of the infrastructure that’s higher than maybe what we were used to seeing around knowledge.

IL: Knowledge—yes, that’s a really interesting point. I’ve been thinking about that. We’re about to launch into strategic planning and looking at different roles. And we were founded on research and trying to create more data on people of color with wealth and donors of color, so that really resonates as a role. And I absolutely would love to talk through a

partnership. We could find a way to follow up on this, but one of our members wants to talk about the funding that they're doing in Puerto Rico for reproductive health.

CS: It's so interesting that you're saying that, because we're trying to figure out how to cover Puerto Rico more, too.

IL: Yes, I read your article.⁸ I thought that was so interesting.

CS: That was so fascinating, how the media organization there is so critical to everything functioning.

IL: Yes, and it makes sense! The Latinx community has done a lot of media work in general, and it has a lot of leadership right now in media infrastructure across the country. But yes, Puerto Rico in particular. We have a member who's doing this and speaking of things that people don't pay attention to, right? They were so frustrated.

CS: I'm from Puerto Rico, so I've been paying attention.

IL: That's good. This is a perfect example. After the *Dobbs* decision, there's been a lot of reproductive and abortion focus on the states but completely ignoring how this might impact Americans who are in Puerto Rico, and how Puerto Rico was really a sanctuary place for people seeking health-care and reproductive healthcare. And so, one of our members is going to be talking about that imminently.

And then on the Asian American side, we have one of our board members, a founding member, who has been very active in the affirmative-action case with SCOTUS, representing the Harvard Asian American Alumni Association. And, really, part of the thinking there is that we do need to think more about solidarity. And that's a very complex set of arguments that, if you're not in it, you might not understand where a lot of Asian Americans stand on the topic. And I think there's a certain type of narrative that's being put out there about Asian Americans and our positions on this. And of course, the opposition has a very specific strategy on how to frame it around race neutrality, which is very fascinating. I think, for those of us who are trying to track how racial equity and justice work is shifting, we're trying to bring in this colorblind racism, this race neutrality or postracial idea, when really the numbers show it's not [postracial]. That is a very nuanced argument that—if you're not really tracking or you're not grounded in the history and the data—could get very murky. And then, just

in general, the concept of having a partnership, I think that's great. I love the type of research and articles [from *NPQ*] that our team shared with me. You're getting into some of the issues that I think are really relevant for our members.

CS: Well, thank you so much. I'm so glad we connected.

IL: Nice to meet you. Thanks, Cyndi.

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Reparations, Not Charity

by Jocelynn Rainey and
Lisa Pilar Cowan

How can those of us who sit at foundations but are not experts in reparations shift our behaviors and practices? How can we give Black leaders, Indigenous leaders, and other leaders of color the support they need while helping to create the conditions required to achieve collective liberation? Many of our foundations have only just begun the full work of reparations: *reckoning, acknowledgment, accountability, and redress.*

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hen Aria Florant, cofounder of Liberation Ventures, told her audience at the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations’ 2022 national conference that “[the project of] reparations needs to shock the system, needs to disrupt White supremacist narratives, close the racial wealth gap, and build a culture of repair,” a question that arose for us was: *How can we bring the insight and promise of the reparations movement to philanthropy, and how do we best use philanthropy to support the work of reparations?*¹

“The American dream,” a term coined by writer and historian James Truslow Adams in 1931, promises that all Americans can obtain the wealth and societal advantages that will allow us to thrive “regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”² In the decades since, the American dream as we know it has become a “rags to riches” promise of wealth and fame, if we choose to work hard enough, and the ability to earn more and have more than the generation who came before.³ It is a dream that has no grounding in our economic reality of growing inequality,⁴ and it is a promise that has never extended to Black Americans and Indigenous peoples, who have systemically been denied opportunities through the United States government’s own decrees and legislation.⁵ America’s economy—and its White residents specifically—have benefited from and been fueled by the institution of slavery and the stealing of Native land.





We have made some progress toward leaving behind the charity mindset and exclusively White-held decision-making power, and have begun listening to new sources of wisdom beyond the traditional White male philanthropist.

Philanthropies like ours—the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation and the Brooklyn Community Foundation—that are funding work to address social, economic, and racial injustice must reckon with this contradiction and support the work of reparations.

We believe that we are working in a liminal time and space. We have made some progress toward leaving behind the charity mindset and exclusively White-held decision-making power, and have begun listening to new sources of wisdom beyond the traditional White male philanthropist. But we are not yet living in a liberated world where capital is distributed evenly and the leaders of our society reflect this country's full spectrum of humanity.

We start with the conviction that philanthropy should not be about individual outcomes or individual generosity but rather about our collective future and our collective responsibility to one another. We believe that we must fundamentally change how philanthropy both conceptualizes and implements its work, and we are cognizant that it will take time, strategic thinking, and perseverance to make these changes. *We have to get this right.*

We are contemplating what for us is the task for this moment: How can those of us who sit at foundations but are not experts in reparations shift our behaviors and practices? How can we give Black leaders, Indigenous leaders, and other leaders of color the support they need while helping to create the conditions required to achieve collective liberation? Many of our foundations have only just begun the full work of reparations: *reckoning, acknowledgment, accountability, and redress.*

So, is there a way at present to authentically and helpfully integrate a reparative framework that helps to move the field?

A REPARATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR PHILANTHROPY

From where we are located—at foundations that are committed to equity but sit squarely in the capital markets, have traditional board and staff structures, and whose missions center racial justice but not reparations and liberation—we believe there are some steps that we can take and some practices that we can integrate, starting now. This is new

territory for us, and we welcome friends, colleagues, and allies to help shape these practices, add others, and spread them.

1. **Move money to the experts.** While there is much work to be done internally and within the philanthropic realm, we can give grants to organizations that are creating the conditions for reparations and bringing reparations into reality. This work is increasing—it is being done nationally (by such groups as the National African-American Reparations Commission⁶ and NDN Collective⁷) and locally (by newer groups, such as Where Is My Land⁸).
2. **Fund expansively, both in terms of grant amount and length of time.** If we give Black leaders, Indigenous leaders, and other leaders of color the resources to dream and act, change will happen. But these cannot just be one-time windfalls; we must be committed to funding organizations expansively over time.
3. **Fund to win.** We must not use grantee leaders for optics, nor can we fund their work and then leave them to sink or swim without the necessary support and blame them for the outcomes. Their wins are our wins—and the same goes for the losses—and the path to winning is not a straight road nor does it happen overnight. Rather than focusing on data and reporting and other traditional measurements of “success,” funders and grantee partners should set mutual expectations and form a shared long-term vision of what success really looks like.
4. **Be part of the movement.** This is not individual work; we need to come together as thought partners and advocates. There are countless issue-based funder groups within our sector dedicated to generating greater resources and attention. Reparations require this same kind of coalition building. Decolonizing Wealth Project,⁹ Liberation Ventures,¹⁰ and NDN Collective are already organizing funders and building critical momentum.
5. **Include reparations in our missions and visions.** Adding reparations work to our organizational mission statement and establishing a vision that includes

“Reparations are a concept rooted in international law that involves specific forms of repair to specific individuals, groups of people, or nations for specific harms they have experienced in violation of their human rights. Therefore, reparations cannot be achieved simply through ‘acknowledgment or an apology’ or ‘investment in underprivileged communities.’”

(The Movement for Black Lives’ *Reparations Now Toolkit*)

Black liberation and Indigenous sovereignty will explicitly indicate that we believe in this work, that we are committed to this work, and that our success depends on it.

With these broad recommendations in mind, we turn the mirror onto our organizations and ask these questions of ourselves, acknowledging that we are not engaged in true reparations work.

The Movement for Black Lives’ *Reparations Now Toolkit* tells us:

[R]eparations include five key components: Cessation/ Assurance of Non-Repetition, Restitution and Repatriation, Compensation, Satisfaction, and Rehabilitation. Reparations are a concept rooted in international law that involves specific forms of repair to specific individuals, groups of people, or nations for specific harms they have experienced in violation of their human rights. Therefore, reparations cannot be achieved simply through “acknowledgment or an apology” or “investment in underprivileged communities.”¹¹

So, then, what can we do to ready our organizations and communities to embrace the full work of reparations?

First, as our colleague Edgar Villanueva’s reparative philanthropy framework adjures: **Acknowledge “the history of your institution and how colonization, slavery, and other forms of oppression facilitated the accumulation of the wealth that you protect, grow, and distribute.”**¹²

At the beginning of every meeting with potential and current grantee partners, the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation shares the foundation story of its wealth.¹³ The hope is that in doing so, we illustrate how it was gathered and the questionable ethics therein. Further, the hope is that it makes clear that the staff of the foundation have no hold on or claim to this money.

The Brooklyn Community Foundation, on its end, was established in 2009 with over \$70 million in assets from a private foundation that had been created by the Independence

Community Bank as part of its IPO in 1998.¹⁴ However, the bank’s history in Brooklyn dates back to the 1850s, encompassing eras of intense wealth building for White residents and explicit exclusion of Black residents from the banking system and the paths it provided to generational wealth building like home ownership. The vast racial wealth gap in our communities today was fostered through the racist redlining practices of banks, including by the foundation’s founders.

Second: **Name and redistribute “the power you have acquired by your proximity to wealth.” Transform “competition, compartmentalization, and bureaucracy in [your] organizational culture and structures facilitated by white dominant culture.”**¹⁵

The Brooklyn Community Foundation adopted a racial justice lens in 2014. This followed a broadscale community engagement process, through which it heard loud and clear that its work was toothless unless it acknowledged systemic racism and committed to addressing the root causes. It was a shift that lost the foundation a few board members and donors, but it also created a new source of momentum and purpose. Then, in 2020, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the national outrage that followed, the foundation deepened its commitments to racial justice grantmaking by adopting participatory grantmaking approaches across all of its unrestricted funding initiatives, to fully share decision-making power with communities of color. The profound national moment fortified its understanding that the work of truly redistributing power for racial justice requires it to be “all-in.”

The Robert Sterling Clark Foundation has, since 2018, adopted and advocated for the principles of trust-based philanthropy and named the power held by funders, so that it defuses that power, cuts bureaucracy, and generates authentic working relationships built of trust and respect.¹⁶ In January 2020, the foundation colauded (with the Whitman Institute and the Headwaters Foundation) the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, a five-year, peer-to-peer funder initiative to help transform the sector. This involves a lot more than just providing general operating support; it is a

This is daunting work, for sure. It disrupts how philanthropy has traditionally done business and invites a reexamination of everything—our jobs, our power structures, our endowments.

holistic approach that has altered the foundation's practices,¹⁷ culture,¹⁸ structures,¹⁹ and leadership.²⁰ It centers equity, humility, and transparency; rebalances the funder–grantee power dynamic; and builds relationships that honor how it treats others on the path to winning on the issues as much as the act of winning itself.

Third: Engage “in the Seven Steps to Healing [Grieve, Apologize, Listen, Relate, Represent, Invest, Repair²¹] in order to build authentic relationships that can facilitate repair for communities that continue to be burdened by the legacy of colonization, slavery, and other forms of oppression and contribute to collective healing for everyone.”²²

Both of our foundations are already deeply committed to the step of listening. The Brooklyn Community Foundation firmly believes that the people who are closest to the challenges are closest to the solutions. They feel the pain of our broken systems, and they have the wisdom to fix them. Starting in 2022, following two years of pandemic-enforced isolation, the foundation launched a new approach to community engagement with its annual Listening Tour series.²³ Brooklyn is home to dozens of neighborhoods and micro-neighborhoods, and it is the foundation's duty to get out and hear from them rather than waiting for them to come to it—or relying on intermediaries. In 2022, the foundation hosted conversations in 10 neighborhoods with nearly 200 residents. In 2023, it will visit 10 new neighborhoods, followed by an

additional 10 in 2024. It will continue this listening cycle every three years, to make sure its understanding of the communities is as dynamic as the communities themselves, that it's always building new relationships with residents and organizations, and that it's accountable for the commitments it has made to each.

Like the Brooklyn Community Foundation, the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation has instituted new ways of convening grantees that center listening and learning with and from them. But it has a long way to go, and the path forward runs counter to the way that organized philanthropy has been doing business. Its systems are not set up to take on those seven steps to healing noted above, and it is looking to others for guidance on how to move, even as it acknowledges its responsibility to do so.

This is daunting work, for sure. It disrupts how philanthropy has traditionally done business and invites a reexamination of everything—our jobs, our power structures, our endowments. And these times demand that we do this internal examination *without* taking time, dollars, or energy away from the work we are funding. We need to work on ourselves, but we cannot stop working on the world. It is hard and confusing work, and there are no great examples to follow. Fortunately, it is also thrilling and inspiring work, and it gets us closer to a world in which we can all thrive.

NOTES

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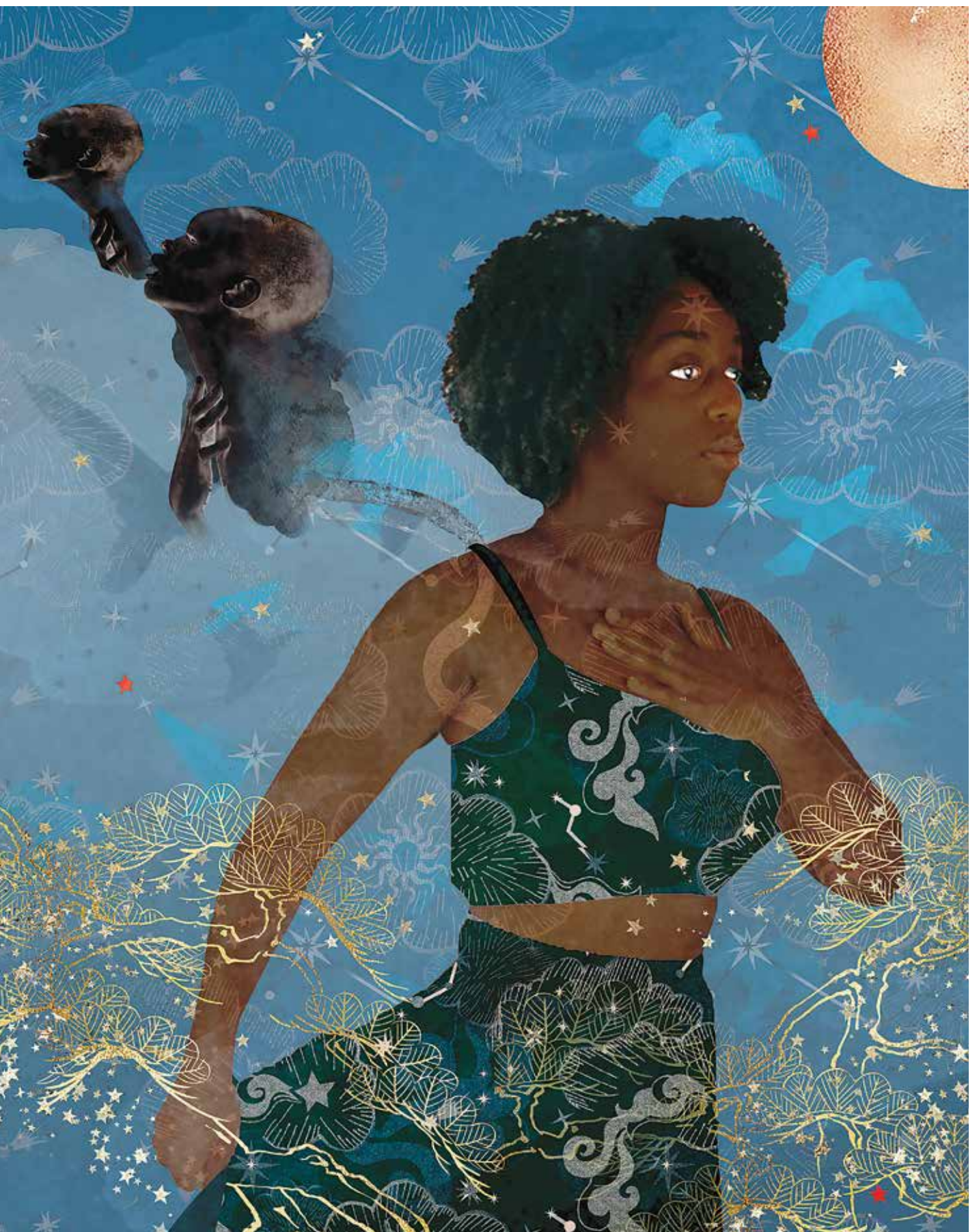
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Toward a New Philanthropy Advancing the Genius of Black-Led Change

*by Lulete Mola, Repa Mekha, and
Chanda Smith Baker*



his is the story of the birth, evolution, and vision of Minnesota's first Black community foundation.

In May 2020, Minnesota was a catalyst for historical uprising against racial injustice in the world. For many of us in Black communities across Minnesota, our bodies remember that eruption—it was familiar because we're in a constant state of uprising against the systems, cultures, and narratives that harm us all.

We remember—before the news channels reported it—the video of Brother George Floyd being murdered by police, recorded by seventeen-year-old Darnella Frazier, circulating within our social media channels.

We remember joining the people in the streets as they gathered, marched, sang, and chanted—crying for freedom and denouncing the degradation and dehumanization of our people.

We remember protecting our blocks, homes, and businesses as White supremacists targeted our neighborhoods.

We remember mourning Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, who were taken just months before; Jamar Clark and Philando Castile, who were taken just years before; and Daunte Wright and Amir Locke, who would be killed within the two years that followed. And mourning the many more before and after, who will never be forgotten.

We remember holding each other, protecting each other, praying for each other, and taking care of each other.

■
We believe that Black people hold the solutions that can set us all free. Since May 2020, we have lived through a changing world of hope, tragedy, resilience, and possibility.

Today, we share with you the realization of a historical uprising: Minnesota's first Black community foundation, the Black Collective Foundation MN, whose mission is to amplify and invest in Black-led social, political, and economic change.

*It felt as if our connection
was destined. We were building
off of the work of previous
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Our community, past and
present, had paved the way
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multiply, and inspire
a movement for new
philanthropy.*

We remember working many days and nights to ensure that the impact of this collective uprising lasted beyond the moment.

We were called to leverage every ounce of power we had to defend Black life. We knew our people had experienced this before, and that if nothing changed, our people would experience this again. *And we knew we had to go beyond defending—we had to dream of a new world and keep moving forward.*

And so we did.

In the middle of the uprising, the three of us, Repa Mekha, Chanda Smith Baker, and Lulete Mola, reached out to one another to consider how we could move the philanthropic sector beyond momentary sympathy into accountability, solidarity, and transformation.

It felt as if our connection was destined. We were building off of the work of previous generations of Black people. Our community, past and present, had paved the way for our power to be rooted in, multiply, and inspire a movement for new philanthropy. It was an intergenerational meeting of hearts and minds, all fully present and active in our communities and leading in the sector of philanthropy.

We put forward a vision of a loving world in which each of us and our families could be safe and could live with hope, dignity, and prosperity. And the Philanthropic Collective to Combat Anti-Blackness and Realize Racial Justice—now, the Black Collective Foundation MN—was born.

WE CALLED ON PHILANTHROPY TO TRANSFORM

The work began immediately. As Black people rooted in community and working in philanthropy, we knew that philanthropy is meant to contribute to the greater good but that it has historically perpetuated anti-Blackness and racism. We were also intimately familiar with philanthropy's proximity to power and to billions of dollars in resources. We wanted to harness that power and capital for our communities.

First, we made a call to philanthropy to step up and commit to taking meaningful action to change systems, practices, and policies within organizations, the field, and society. This included a call to make unprecedented investments in the short- and long-term to support Black movement, infrastructure, leadership, and responsive efforts, along with substantive and ongoing investment in our emerging vision.

This involved asking philanthropic institutions to sign on to a bold and courageous joint statement that amounted to a public declaration of their commitment to racial justice—in order to demonstrate solidarity with the movement and to inspire public accountability of institutional philanthropy, past, present, and future.¹ This statement was shaped by a group of Black leaders and additional leaders of various cultures in the field of philanthropy. It was drafted with deep thought, and the intention was for it to act as a living agreement that will continue to inspire and invoke action long after its having been signed. It would be the first time a philanthropic coalition had specifically condemned anti-Blackness, anti-Black police violence, and racism. We dedicated many hours to talking with philanthropic institutional leaders and board members—listening and educating on the importance of the language, context, and vision being set forth.

Reception to this invitation varied. A significant number of partners moved swiftly to sign the statement with the full support of their organizations. A few institutions wound up having to have hard internal conversations, and came to the conclusion that they needed more time but offered to support the cause through funding the work and continuing their education and relationship with us. And some met the moment—and continue to meet the many moments that have followed—with inaction.

The spectrum of responses gave us important information regarding the opportunities for and barriers to change. With this knowledge and clarity, we forged forward. We established grounding values for our emerging work, including the following:

- Belief in the **abundance of resources and possibilities**
- Commitment to **combating anti-Blackness**—the distinct and violent targeting of Black people and Black power—through **centering Black dignity, power, and culture**
- Recognition of the critical role of **principled struggle**—Black people hold varied beliefs and approaches to how change happens, and this must be taken into account when working toward change²

WE GATHERED, STUDIED, AND LISTENED

We followed that initial call with a learning series that brought together people of great power in philanthropy to address anti-Blackness and work toward realizing racial justice in philanthropy. We invited movement leaders and members of our community into these spaces of power to define and contextualize the uprising as it unfolded in real time.

Our most impactful session took place as the Derek Chauvin trial began, in March 2021, and we pivoted from our original plans to pause and reflect. We invited guests to join an intimate conversation about what it meant to the three of us to live in a time of radical hope and despair. During the conversation, we opened up our intimate space to share our personal connection to the movement for Black lives, Black struggle, and Black joy. We discussed our ongoing grief and pain in the face of racial injustice.

Sometimes, it felt like we couldn't breathe. Other times, it felt like we were living in a once-in-a-lifetime, limited moment of opportunity to bring forth tangible systemic and cultural change. Often, we felt both these things at once. Living within our bodies and within our communities, while pushing one of the most powerful sectors in the world—philanthropy—to transform, took a toll on us. We put everything on the line—our time, resources, jobs, hearts, and minds—and led with vulnerability and courage to challenge the making and function of a system that often did not include or believe in people like us.

*We learned just how hungry
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other and to the sector.*

As we engaged in the dialogue, we called in the work of ancestors and scholars Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Dr. Martin Luther King, and others to shape the conversation. We leaned into what that particular moment was asking of us: truth and transparency. And then we imagined out loud what justice would feel like for each of us.

That particular session was special for many reasons. First, we needed it: before we are leaders—or any *title* at any organization—we are impacted individuals who love our people. The session allowed us to process in real time and connect our hearts to the work that was unfolding before us. Second, we learned that Black folks in our fellow philanthropic institutions also needed it. They expressed how important it was for them to witness their own experiences mirrored in the people leading the work to shift the sector. We learned just how hungry Black leaders in philanthropy are for a stronger sense of connectedness to each other and to the sector. These folks exist as changemakers in unique and often misunderstood positions, having to transform (often) historically White foundations while simultaneously being present and accountable to/in their communities. The need for intentional spaces for collectively breathing, for reprieve, and for healing was urgent. In response, we created our ongoing social, “Rooting for Everybody Black!”—a space for connectedness, mentorship, relationship building, and learning.³

During this time, we continued engaging with hundreds of individuals, staff, board members, and partners in the sector, along with many others in our community. We asked all to partner with us in an emergent process, allowing trust, space, and time for the work *to become*.

We engaged with communities most impacted by racial injustice in the process of identifying our strategic direction, as we sought to better understand the opportunities and obstacles in Minnesota's funding ecosystem; identify strategic opportunities to have impact in combating

We're supporting Black-led change through creative grantmaking that invests in the unique and special ways that Black-led change happens—from legacy organizations to emerging ideas to underground change to innovative initiatives.

anti-Blackness and realizing racial justice; and refine the goals and structure of the collective. This deep and intentional listening revealed the following clear and urgent objectives:

1. *Build a Black foundation to shift philanthropic power, so that Black communities are making the decisions regarding resource allocation.*
2. *Influence the philanthropic field to adequately advance racial justice by inspiring, supporting, and transforming philanthropy to be in power-shifting solidarity.*
3. *Sustain and grow the capacity and wellbeing of Black-led change, including leaders and organizations.*

With this strong vision for our next steps, one of our cofounders (and a cowriter of this article), Lulete Mola, stepped into the role of president, and we began forming what exists today as Minnesota's first Black community foundation.

In this time of heightened danger, unrest, and urgency, we had been leaning on Black leaders in positions of power and influence to move resources and provide infrastructure support in partnership with leaders on the ground. And as we built *our* organization, we leaned on Nexus Community Partners, led by another of our cofounders (and a cowriter of this article), Repa Mekha, to provide such support to us. As we were refining our vision, organizing support, and emerging, Nexus—which for over a decade has supported community-building initiatives, expanded community wealth, and fostered social and human capital—served as a container of our work by providing fiscal and operational support. (And we recorded our own experiences of emergence so that we could replicate what worked and fill in gaps

in what we needed as we sought to create a thriving ecosystem of Black-led change.)

WE ADVANCED THE GENIUS OF BLACK-LED CHANGE

We believe that Black people hold the solutions that can set us all free. Since May 2020, we have lived through a changing world of hope, tragedy, resilience, and possibility. Today, we share with you the realization of a historical uprising: Minnesota's first Black community foundation, the Black Collective Foundation MN, whose mission is to amplify and invest in Black-led social, political, and economic change so that it reaches its full capacity of impact for good.

Since forming, we have done the following:

- Raised \$5 million to catalyze the work
- Expanded Black philanthropic power through our Community Builders Practice—a program that trains and engages members of our community in racial justice philanthropy
- Gathered changemakers across the community
- Disbursed over \$1 million through participatory grantmaking to advance the genius of Black-led change—and are poised to distribute millions more
- Influenced the narrative of racial justice philanthropy
- Continued strengthening our institutional infrastructure

Building infrastructure for this level of change will take time, but we're working relentlessly toward bringing our vision to life in a sustainable way. A key method for this is creating an endowment, which will ensure that we are building community wealth that allows self-determination and income in perpetuity for the genius of Black-led change. In addition, we're leading critical research on Black-led change and racial justice, and using that learning to systematize the culture of philanthropy in our communities through new iterations of donor-advised funds, participatory grantmaking, and additional tools of philanthropy.

We're supporting Black-led change through creative grantmaking that invests in the unique and special ways that Black-led change happens—from legacy organizations to emerging ideas to underground change to innovative

initiatives. We're creating soulful spaces where Black changemakers can gather, get the personal and collective support they need to sustain their work, and build power. In a journal entry, futuristic author Octavia Estelle Butler once wrote, "All good things must begin."⁴ Our collective work

emerged from a time of tragedy, and today begins again as a vision of possibility. Together, we are advancing the genius of Black-led change to build a community where all Black people are holistically well and live in dignity and prosperity.

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LULETE MOLA is cofounder and president of the Black Collective Foundation MN, Minnesota's first Black community foundation advancing the genius of Black-led change. She leads the collective in building infrastructure, practicing creative and innovative resource disbursement, growing assets, and expanding Black philanthropic power to advance a new model of philanthropy. Previously, Mola was chief strategy and innovation officer at the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, where she led community investments, programming, strategic communications, and bold fundraising that enabled large-scale systems change. In this role, she also led the Young Women's Initiative of Minnesota, a \$10 million public-private partnership to achieve equity in opportunities and improve the lives of young Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color. Mola is devoted to supporting community organizing, movement building, and work to advance women's political leadership. She is on the Minnesota Council on Foundations board of directors and VoteRunLead's national advisory board. She is the recipient of the 2020 SOAR fellowship with the Aspen Institute Forum on Women and Girls, and, in 2022, received a Facing Race award for her work in challenging absent and harmful narratives on race, building solutions, and pushing for justice and equity. Mola graduated summa cum laude from the University of Minnesota, where she recently received the College of Liberal Arts Emerging Alumni Award. **REPA MEKHA** has over 30 years of experience in community-based leadership, community capacity building, asset- and wealth-building strategies, organizational leadership and development, and systems change work. He is recognized locally and nationally as an innovative and visionary leader, and heads Nexus Community Partners' work with national partners. Mekha sits on a number of boards, including the Center for Economic Inclusion, the Minnesota Council on Foundations, and Shared Capital Cooperatives. He is also cofounder of the Twin Cities African American Leadership Forum and the Black Collective Foundation MN. He holds an MA in public administration from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government (with a focus on community development) and a BA in sociology and urban studies from the University of Wisconsin. Mekha is a 2005 Bush Leadership Fellow and a 2004 James P. Shannon Leadership Institute alumnus. **CHANDA SMITH BAKER** has more than 20 years of experience working in, for, and with underestimated communities. In 2017, Baker joined the Minneapolis Foundation, where she serves as the chief impact officer and senior vice president overseeing the foundation's grantmaking programs, providing strategic direction to community initiatives and partnerships. Baker is host of the award-winning podcast *Conversations with Chanda*. Previously, Baker spent 17 years at Pillsbury United Communities, pursuing bold strategies to address systemic inequities, and culminating her career there as president and CEO. In addition to being a cofounder of the Black Collective Foundation MN, Baker has served on and led numerous nonprofit and philanthropic boards throughout her career, including as a trustee at the Women's Foundation of Minnesota and a board member for the Joyce Foundation. Her civic leadership has been recognized with awards and commendations, including being named an MN Business magazine (Real) Power 50 honoree, receiving the Hubert H. Humphrey Leadership Award, and being named a Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal Women in Business honoree.

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Living beyond *the* Constructs

A Conversation
with **Cyndi Suarez**
and **Marcus Walton**

■

“Everything is a synthesis. It’s informed by the people who are right there. The real thing that we’re trying to do, I believe, is tap into the collective genius of the people who are in a particular situation, who are involved. They’re there because they have all of the pieces that are required to build that puzzle. That particular puzzle in that moment can be built by everyone involved in that. . . . That’s the spiritual practice.”



In this conversation with Cyndi Suarez, NPQ's president and editor in chief, and Marcus Walton, president and CEO of Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, the two leaders discuss NPQ's and GEO's journeys of organizational transformation, and how we move beyond the what is to embrace the what can be.

Marcus Walton: I'm proud of the progress you've made.

I remember this [NPQ elevating the voices of social change leaders of color] was a vision of yours. And it took a lot of courage for you to move NPQ in this direction. I just remember the earliest days, and I'm so excited to see you doing it. You are making such an impact in the field in ways that I just couldn't even imagine.

Cyndi Suarez: Really? What are you seeing in the field?

MW: I feel like you're giving space for creative people to produce valuable assets, to practice exercising our voices; and in doing so, the platform is giving credibility to an entire group of people for whom the sector didn't provide the same kind of entrée. I mean, creatives were able to achieve a certain level of visibility prior to NPQ, but it took initiative to establish it. Now, you can kind of cheat, you know . . . funders can simply look at NPQ's growing body of work and see who you're talking to.

CS: It's true. But you know what? Those people have also given NPQ credibility.

MW: Well, you already had it, as far as I'm concerned. That is something that I just haven't thought about. It was a "given" to me—but yes, you're absolutely right.

CS: That's interesting, because it's had a certain kind of credibility, but I think it has a different kind of credibility now.

MW: I agree with that. It's just, to me, through this platform, you are really showing people what's possible through reimagining our world. But you've always had the vision. It's just another way. Now there's a little bit more access to resources available for everyone to share and experience.

Relationships are just more open. Platforms like NPQ make the search easier.

CS: I have so much fun in my job.

We're being asked to do so many things that the sector needs. But I'm not sure we should do it all. We need to partner with people and create an ecosystem, so that we can do a part of it and then other people can do part of it.

MW: I think that's the best contribution that we [GEO] can make—that we are a community and have infrastructure. I want that infrastructure to go toward spreading this story and hosting these conversations, so it's not just you and me, it's you *plus* the next leader in a particular area—to help us all understand: What does leadership look like in this space? What does effectiveness look like in practice, in this context? And then for all of the leaders we see you interviewing, we can routinely interview them every few months, or have them as a part of our ongoing webinar series around whatever it is that you label it. But GEO can be one of multiple venues for you to bring that content to life in a different way.

So, for example, the Maurice Mitchell story, which caught fire in 2022—best story of the year.¹

CS: It really was. It was our most popular story.

MW: It was, because everyone's been struggling with the challenge of building resilient organizations; especially throughout the pandemic as well as this unprecedented period of global racial awakening and reckoning, which I believe is still underway!

CS: Right. Right.

“We’re being asked to do so many things that the sector needs. But I’m not sure we should do it all. We need to partner with people and create an ecosystem, so that we can do a part of it and then other people can do part of it.”

MW: And so, I want to position that for funders, for people who are leading philanthropic organizations, to be able to think differently and workshop ideas for integration with peers, and grapple constructively with the myriad complexities associated with implementing racially equitable principles and practices. That article can be a yearlong exploration.

CS: He wants to do that.

MW: That’s what I want to do.

CS: Yeah, let’s do it.

I’ve known Moe forever, and I’ve never seen Moe not be amazing. I’ve never seen him not change everything from a place of utter humility and competence. You know what I mean? He’s just one of those people.

MW: Think about how we can bring that alive as workshop experiences for people over the course of three years, five years. GEO’s a dynamic community as well as an evergreen institution. We don’t have to think in just these tiny little buckets of time. I want to stretch this stuff out and make people feel like they are part of a journey, an experience that matches the progression of their careers. Let’s hear about how we arrived here, and really challenge people to think in their seats—how these things are playing out in practice. Part of what the field needs is for our workplaces to be characterized by presence and expansiveness—spaciousness—which are essential for creatively responding to issues that we’ve never seen come forward in the same way before. Right?

My highest aspiration is for GEO to be a space where leaders-of-color issues become mainstream. We’re intentionally mainstreaming issues that were previously considered fringe. We want them to just be normalized. Like, No, you

don’t have to be scared of this anymore. It’s just what it is. Our fates and futures are shared, not separate. Let’s work together toward a shared vision for thriving.

CS: I wanted to ask you about that. Because I had the pleasure of going to the GEO conference last year, and I see the difference. I was like, Marcus is doing something over here. And I knew you were, but I think that was the first time I saw it.

MW: It was the first evidence through an in-person experience that anyone could really grasp. However, the journey started before my tenure. Hiring me was a realization of one feature of GEO’s commitment to racial equity as a community, which was declared publicly at the National Conference in 2018, in San Francisco.

CS: Right, right. I mean, I’ve been to GEO conferences before, and they never looked like that. So, I wanted to hear about that and to hear about what you’ve been doing. I mean, it’s my third year at NPQ, and this is your third year, too, right? So, what’s it been like? What are you learning?

MW: I’m gonna give you the unfiltered story—from my point of view, of course—to clarify the record and honor so many leaders over the past decade or so (and beyond) who don’t get credited with their contributions to GEO’s transformation. I know that’s always welcome with you! Let me say first and foremost, a thesis that guides all of this is that the work of enduring leading change is relational, and it extends beyond our positions as well as our organizational affiliations—its impact is deeply personal. For example, my relationship with you is evidence of that. And any progress is a result of our commitment to supporting each other’s aspirational vision over time.

“A thesis that guides all of this is that the work of enduring leading change is relational, and it extends beyond our positions as well as our organizational affiliations—its impact is deeply personal.”

CS: I think that's a very Marcus approach. That is very you, Marcus. Not everyone does it that way.

MW: Okay, perhaps so.

CS: What brought you to that? Maybe you've always been like this—just like I've always been kind of bold; I just now started getting rewarded for it.

MW: Yeah. I can't say I've always been like this. In some ways, I am motivated by winning, Cyndi—I simply want to win. But I want everyone to win, not just me. And so, if I come across a situation where someone has been effective in their pursuits, whether I agree with their politics or not, I say, “You know what? *That* approach is effective.” And boom! I latch onto it and integrate it into my evolving set of approaches and ideas for advancing my pursuits. Over the course of time, I've met many people from different backgrounds, and I've learned the most from those who challenge my way of being and thinking—mainly, ordinary folks who are patient, loving, and generous with their care and insights. To this day, I admire those qualities in others. And I appreciate how the practice of acknowledging the people who I admire checks ego and keeps me flexible, open-minded, and open-hearted. I find it profoundly humbling!

As I developed a habit of patterning certain aspects of myself after people who made lasting impressions on me, eventually I was able to be effective in similar ways. So, I just kept doing it. I experienced it like this: “Oh, that worked! What if I try that here? Oh, what if I read *The Power Manual* and follow the point of view that Cyndi put forward?² This stuff works!” And so, to this day, I just keep going with it. And it has shaped me to the point that now I talk about the importance of allowing the change process to transform me or to transform us as leaders. Being “all-in” does that. As a result, I have experienced personal transformation many times throughout my career. I've been the beneficiary of growth, if you will, from patterning myself after people I admire, who I think are brilliant, who I think just offer something that is special. And in some ways, it just rubs off. I'm not saying I'm special, but I am confident that the characteristics of the people with whom I surround myself express themselves through how I show up as a leader.

CS: Yeah, I think of that as channeling. I've been in situations where . . . you know, I used to have a little bit of a bad temper. I'm still, you know, fiery.

MW: Yeah, I like it though! The provocateur!

CS: I've been in situations where I'm like, I'm gonna channel. This is not the time for that, and I'm gonna channel this person. It just happens. I end up being real patient and real sweet and all this stuff, so I get it.

So, tell me a little bit about your journey at GEO.

MW: My journey of organizational transformation at GEO is so interesting. For different reasons, I've been invited to tell this story a few times this week! And I don't believe in coincidences, so I'm inclined to believe it's time. So, year one, I came into an organization with a history of bringing people together, of highlighting important work in the sector and taking stances in support of nonprofit grantees and communities, but not necessarily focusing on mobilization.

The leadership transition of the founder had a profound impact on staff, as leadership transitions do, impacting the organization in a manner that required leadership to prioritize supporting the healing and a kind of reorientation of the organization. Cyndi, like so many other scenarios in our sector—as evidenced by the building resilient organizations article—GEO experienced organizational tensions that were bubbling beneath the surface, including staff wanting to push change faster around racial equity, and having different appetites for change in other areas of operations and programming. Over time, every person was impacted, and the mood was uneasy at moments. In my opinion, overlapping cycles of attrition in key positions took an emotional toll that required us to work together as both staff and board. As folks matriculated out and those roles weren't immediately filled, a kind of structural degradation started to occur inside of the entity.

CS: And how big was GEO at the time, in terms of staff?

MW: It's back to its original size of around 24 or 25 folks.

CS: And what level of attrition had it reached by the time you got there?

MW: It was 14 or 15, but the combined impact of sheltering in place/the pandemic, racial reckoning, and political unrest made it feasible to imagine additional staff turnover.

CS: And was it mostly people of color who were leaving?

MW: Oh, no. There was not a large percentage of people of color working here.

CS: Really? So, White staff were also leaving?

MW: It felt to me like a more accurate way to characterize the trend was around years of experience. A critical mass of senior officers transitioned out of the organization as I was transitioning into my role. So, folks who were new to the field, or new to leadership, were being challenged around the kind of support they needed in the absence of senior leadership who had significant experience with GEO systems and processes, as well as a working understanding of how things function within the philanthropic sector—whether it’s written or unwritten rules, right? These were the dynamics playing out. There were people of color representing a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds—from South Asian to African American. But there wasn’t ever a large number of any particular group. So, it resembled a diverse workplace in the traditional sense, in that it was majority White-identified staff.

CS: So, it was the leadership that was leaving?

MW: As it sometimes happens within small-to-medium-size organizations, a critical mass of officers in core areas of the organization left in succession. And that level of attrition happening in overlapping variables had the obvious impact that you would expect on GEO. So, I came in first having to address that and then having to simultaneously support the individuals, because they were vulnerable. Folks needed and wanted guidance. But the disruptive nature of the leadership transitions generated distrust—despite noteworthy attempts of leadership, who continued to steward the organization throughout every phase. So, there was the twofold challenge of stabilizing the organization and supporting the individuals through a collective grief process, because they had experienced a lot of loss as well as a lot of transition in a small amount of time. That was 2019, September.

CS: How did you address that? What did you do?

MW: It was a systematic approach, which involved shared leadership. As a complement to the skills and experience of the remaining senior leaders on the team, I brought a coaching and racial-equity training background from which I could draw: ontological learning. And so, I knew, Okay, there are some ways in which we can help people acknowledge what they’ve been through, derive any value from the experience, then release it. But it’s a process that one has to go through. You kind of find emotional acceptance with things, and then

“When I came on board, people were looking backward and feeling the effects of exposure to persistent disruptive forces of organizational change. They needed additional therapeutic space to sort through the impacts of this experience, acknowledge it all, and say, ‘Yep, this happened.’”

start to reorient your focus toward what you want to experience next. When I came on board, people were looking backward and feeling the effects of exposure to persistent disruptive forces of organizational change. They needed additional therapeutic space to sort through the impacts of this experience, acknowledge it all, and say, “Yep, this happened. There’s nothing wrong with you. This thing happened. It’s not your fault.”

So, the team and I had to be really creative about how we did that, because we simultaneously needed to build trust with each other as senior leaders and with our colleagues within the organization. No one could do this alone! Now, interestingly enough, Cyndi, September/October 2019 is just six months before the pandemic, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd. Around this time, I was doing one-on-one informational interviews with staff, with previous board members, with existing board members, and with potential partners—including exploration with Equity in the Center as an institutional partnership. Then, the world changed all at once! So, we were challenged to respond to the needs that were particular to the pandemic while still being in stabilization mode from the leadership transitions. Like everyone, we moved to remote status; yet we still needed to fill some critical positions that had been left vacant for long periods. After considerable deliberation with GEO leaders, as well as with leaders within the ecosystem of change-focused organizations, I decided to bring in resources that responded to organization-wide patterns and trends that threatened to erode trust and weaken the social fabric among the staff and board.

“Everyone has a role in supporting the transformation of society, and it starts with an individual focus of our personal transformation. And the nonprofit sector has a critical leadership role in this.”

CS: Can you give an example?

MW: Yes, one example was that there were people at different stages of the hierarchy, different levels, who were saying, “My experience of GEO is this”—so, let’s say that’s the associate level—and then there’s a middle level of directors and managers who would say, “Well, mine is like this.” It would be similar but slightly different. Some things are common, some not. And the senior leadership might be feeling an entirely different thing, because of their responsibilities as well as the time of tenure or vantage point of the philanthropic landscape. Because, people had seen or experienced certain cycles before, and it didn’t generate the same response for everyone within the organization or broader community.

CS: That would be me. I’ve been through like, five or six of these organizational transitions.

MW: But some differences in response were being interpreted as lack of care. What do you call it when you simply are not paying attention to certain dynamics within a situation or relationship?

CS: I know what you’re talking about. Not abandonment, but neglect.

MW: Neglect. And the *feeling* was abandonment. And people in different places within the organization were feeling like, Our culture is one of neglect, and I feel abandoned. This is inside of the very organization that I continue to lead today! So, I’m saying, Whoa!

CS: What was it like for you?

MW: It felt horrible. If it weren’t for the network of folks who were supporting me prior to coming into GEO—*plus* during—then I don’t know what I would have done. Certainly, my experience would’ve been different. Luckily, I had the foresight to know that if I was gonna do this, it had to be through shared leadership—that I had to be leaning on my colleagues both inside of GEO as well as in the field for support. And I did. I wasn’t foolish enough to believe like, Oh, I’m so this or that, and I got this. Instead, I was like, No, I think I can . . . I think I can do it . . . and I want to ask for help from all of these different people to support me through it. And they did, in different ways. And one of the hallmarks was the article around double consciousness that you invited me to write.³ It caught fire. It was so viral in so many important spaces, that it captured the attention of folks in the ecosystem. It provided valuable

visibility to the point where when I knocked on a door to cultivate a new relationship, people were interested and already motivated to open it. What was it about the article? What do you think they were hearing that they needed to hear? That I don’t know. I am very uncomfortable speaking from someone else’s point of view. But what I do know is that there was so much energy generated from that writing.

So, I feel like it was from that moment that I started to enjoy a professional reputation for being circumspect, for being inclusive, for still representing at its core the need to address inequity, address all of the *isms*, prioritize communities that are disproportionately impacted over time historically—including and especially Black ones, but with an intersectional emphasis. But I was saying, “We are all in this together. Everyone has a role in supporting the transformation of society, and it starts with an individual focus of our personal transformation. And the nonprofit sector has a critical leadership role in this.” So, you gave me the platform.

CS: Is that, for you, the gist of your article?

MW: No, no, no, but just the way you asked the question of double consciousness in the article—including, “What’s your experience as a Black leader today?” It was so unfiltered . . . so raw . . . relevant to the Black experience in today’s context, which was unusual at the time! And when my response was one that invited everyone—i.e., the cultural diaspora—into it, it set an important precedent of, like, Oh, that’s how he rolls. It allowed me to honor my experience as well as my point of view, unapologetically.

CS: It’s very interesting, because I get that, too, from my book. I’ve had a lot of White men from all over the world tell me that it’s a *generous* book. They use that word—and I say, “Why do you use that word?” They say, “Well, you’re not trying

to shift things so that Black people are on top; you're trying to change it for all of us." And I'm thinking, That's White people's biggest fear.

MW: I have been a part of many conversations discussing that as a common point of fear, Cyndi.

CS: That we're gonna do to them what they have been doing to us.

MW: What "they" did to us. So, check this out! One of the conversations that came out of that was a colleague—who wasn't a colleague back then—sharing how she believes one of the biggest challenges of racial equity work is that we're asking people to be in relationship professionally in ways that are more intimate than their personal lives. The fact is, some of us have never focused on vulnerability and trust to this degree before. So now, think about how that insight informs what is truly needed in our civic engagement efforts. That's how it connects back to GEO. We understand that what's needed includes a welcoming space where we support people through that reorientation, that development of a process in which they're challenging their own thoughts, they're feeling insecure ("What about my identity?"), the whole breakdown that goes with that—so that we can build it back up.

I have done that in my coaching practice. I have a familiarity with how that cycle works. And so, that was the approach I used. And then, externally, starting to reorient our programming to situate people in that point of view—of shared leadership as well as all being in this together. So, think back now to the national conference, and some of the conversations that you experienced. We're on a particular message: we're saying that equity matters, racial equity matters, for effectiveness. And that was a message that was first announced back at the 2018 National Conference in San Francisco. But now we're also inviting you into a process to grapple with complexity, because it's everyone's issue. This is not exclusively a Black people issue. This ain't a "of color issue." This is not a White-identified issue. These constructs do not serve us outside of data generation and analytical efforts. Instead, we are all implicated in this as a multicultural, pluralistic society. And so, that's GEO at its best—my vision is that GEO becomes a place where we get better and better at having these conversations across difference.

CS: Yes, it's really interesting, because I think about NPQ, and now we are definitely a people-of-color organization. It wasn't intended. It was just that when I was looking for people who knew the complexity of the issues, those are the people who did. So now, Joel, my copresident, who is a White man, I've honestly been just so impressed and amazed by how he's become such a great partner in this work.

MW: That's so good.

CS: NPQ went through a really similar transition.

MW: So, here's the thing, and I'm gonna give you credit for this—again, this is a shout-out to NPQ. The evolution of that story that I started with, and that story that I was telling you about GEO? Today, when I take us forward into a vision of living beyond constructs, that's the end goal. The goal is not racial-equity analysis. That's just the analysis, right? The end goal is that we are able to consider thriving from a position that is devoid of restrictive, historically based constructs that are all about power and manipulation. Instead, it's about humanity. It's our common humanity that guides our work. It's the most antiracist posture that has occurred to me so far.

CS: Totally. It is about humanity. And when I wrote my book, actually, that's what I had in mind. After being through so many organizational change processes, I said to myself, There has to be a way for us to talk about this. Because I had done so many years of training to develop my capacity in power work, and I thought, No one's gonna do this. This is too high of a bar.

“The goal is not racial-equity analysis. That's just the analysis, right? The end goal is that we are able to consider thriving from a position that is devoid of restrictive, historically based constructs that are all about power and manipulation. Instead, it's about humanity.”

MW: Oh, I know. Like, are you kidding?

CS: Like, how many years studying this? And I thought, There has to be a way for us to have these discussions where people can have integrity, where people can actually be human. And I think that's the generative stance—that's why I started to move beyond race to talking about power.

MW: And so, check this out, though. In order to do what you just said, it occurs to me that we have to, as individuals, do our work. Like, I had to do my work. I had to heal, or else I was gonna be triggered by whatever that person over there does. I learned that if I still harbor unexpressed emotions about what happened in the past—to me or my grandparents or other ancestors—and I haven't reckoned with its impact on me and released any residual contempt to liberate myself to dream about and reimagine what's possible now, then it's only going to contribute to toxicity in me and my relationships, by extension. And so, that's what I'm bringing to GEO: a vision for fostering healing, reconciliation, and thriving together. And moving capital into places where it is most catalytic for change is an essential part of the process.

CS: I always think if I didn't have a spiritual practice, there's so much that I would not be able to do. It's funny, because in the piece I wrote for this issue, "Leadership Is Voice," Foucault starts talking at the end about Socrates.⁴ Apparently, Socrates was considered a realized being. He's considered a *siddha*.⁵ And at the end, where Foucault talks about practices, he talks about how, ultimately, they are spiritual—he calls it the technique of techniques. He says they're all ultimately spiritual practices around self-sovereignty around your

"I thought, There has to be a way for us to have these discussions where people can have integrity, where people can actually be human. And I think that's the generative stance—that's why I started to move beyond race to talking about power."

thoughts, around your actions, and around how you live your life.⁶ So, when I think about these things, they're such high bars. I mean, just like the other thing is a high bar, right? When I think about it now, when I sit in the spaces for people of color who are struggling—spaces that are hosted by funders—we don't get to this. We stay in the material realm. Because going there requires a higher level of consciousness, and I feel like we don't talk about how that's a prerequisite for the work.

MW: I love being able to slow you down. I love your pace, and I love breaking your pace down into its components. But I think this is what GEO can be to NPQ—that's why I said a five-year plan. That's how long it takes to start to internalize some of the stuff that we're talking about. So, check this out: What if we consider that consciousness itself is a leadership variable? Yes! This makes it possible to make different connections to what it means or what is required to be effective as a leader. In this context, I can now consider the possibility of spirituality (i.e., the practice of cultivating consciousness) as an antidote to colonialism or White dominant culture. Some may say, "Why is that? How could that possibly be true?" Because if you catalogue the myriad expressions of dominant cultural norms and values, the headline is a prescriptive list of regimented rules that dictate value and superiority, right? Whereas spirituality is the opposite. It says, "Hey, there's more than one way. But there's a common path." And my experience is that it moves in a direction of that self-realization that you talked about, of self-actualization. It honors our collective humanity, and it moves us toward a shared vision of something that is bigger than our individual pieces and components. That, to me, is the biggest, most oppositional force to any dominant or competitive way of being—the way that says, "Comply, comply, comply. Be this way, or you're not valuable."

CS: Now, there's so much in that, Marcus. So, I have a whole section on this in my book, where I talk about the *tattvas*⁷—because my spiritual practice is Eastern based. The *tattvas* are about 36 levels of reality. The highest level is unity consciousness. And then, as soon as you start dropping down, I think at the third level, you start inserting difference. Difference is the thing that ignites power dynamics. As soon as we start to see each other as different, we get separation. And power starts coming into play.

MW: That's right. That's what Dr. John Powell is talking about with othering and belonging.⁸

CS: Totally, totally. It's really hard for people. But then there's also the thing about abundance versus scarcity. The highest level is also the level where you already have everything. And so, once we have those two things . . . like, whenever I have an issue, I sit down and meditate. I meditate and do yoga every day, but if I didn't have those kinds of practices to anchor me . . .

MW: That's the answer to your question, Cyndi. You started asking me how I did this at GEO. It's because I had that spiritual practice. I had that foundation. I just called it *coaching* because I needed a secular modality that wasn't stigmatized. It's always been a practice of cultivating and expanding human consciousness.

CS: Can you say more? How are coaching and spiritual practice similar to you?

MW: Ontological learning, which is the version of coaching that I offer, deals with three realms of being. It's the science of being. We look at the language realm, the emotional realm, and the somatic realm, and how they overlap, intersect, or not. And places of intersection represent coherence. It's harmony. It's oneness. It's alignment. It's being centered. And so, you're saying things, your language reflects your actions, and your actions and language also reflect your mood and emotional state.

CS: This is what Foucault talks about in his book. He says that, ultimately, the truth-teller is the one for whom there is no gap between the logos and the bios—what you know and how you behave. And it's really interesting, because in Vedic scriptures, that's called “Matrika Shakti,” the power of words.⁹ Words create the world. And to me, as a writer . . . that's my mantra.

MW: Your jam. It's where you live.

CS: And so, when I came into this role, I started to think of it as *articulation leadership*. And what I tried to have writers focus on is saying what needs to be said that is not said. And to say it in the way that is the most abundant.

MW: That's an important element: the most abundant way of doing it. It's not always what people choose.

CS: Oh, no, no, no. And I have to—I always—think about this. So, Matrika Shakti. When I first started, I had a lot of people ask me: “Are you overwhelmed?” It was almost like they wanted me to be overwhelmed. I'm like, I am not using that word. I would say: “No, I am learning to live in abundance.”

“You have to be careful about the thoughts that come into your mind, and which ones are yours and which ones are not. Which ones align with what you've chosen as important and which ones do not. So, I think about that a lot. And this is why I'm so into leadership as voice, because I know that our words create reality.”

Because I knew that if I started to take those words on. . . . This is where the sovereignty piece comes in. You have to be careful about the thoughts that come into your mind, and which ones are yours and which ones are not. Which ones align with what you've chosen as important and which ones do not. So, I think about that a lot. And this is why I'm so into leadership as voice, because I know that our words create reality. Words have so much power—and by the time you utter them, that is when they have the least power. The most power is when it's still in your gut and you're still forming it, and you're still trying to figure out the word to capture the big thing that, even when it comes out as a word, it's already . . .

MW: It's already distilled down so much. But here's the beauty of what you just said: We say we live in language, in ontological spaces. But what you just described and what I know through practice is that in order for the abundance mindset to be possible, I had to get to a point where I believed that life was always responding to my deepest desire through experiences. So, it was creating physical experiences for me to engage and learn lessons. See things play out. That's what you just described. It's not the words. The words have creative power, too, but it's the form. It's as the words are being formed internally and moving through the energy centers. That's where, through the meditative practice or the breathing practice, I'm connecting into what it is that is driving me. What's the root cause of my thoughts and behavior? What is my language when I, as an observer, listen to the way I'm organizing words? What is that telling me? What narrative is informing my beliefs? That's what coaching, in the way that

I have described it to you, has helped people do: to be intentional about understanding how those things are working together or not, and then shift into a posture that is more aligned.

CS: Same, yeah.

Can you tell me a story about when you saw this all come together at GEO? Is there something that captures that? Because what you're saying, it's almost like . . . I get it, but it can also be ephemeral. And I'm sure people are going to be reading this and being like, Well, how did he do that?

MW: It hasn't completed. The cycle is not complete yet. And so, I have gone through the stages of laying the groundwork for this. And it has transformed me as a result. The most important element of this is that I'm not doing GEO any favors, GEO is doing *me* a favor. By joining the leadership of this entity and this group of people that represent the GEO community, the process of transformation has transformed me, Cyndi.

I have had to adjust. I came in with a vision and language and a way to do it. It's like, Oh, yeah, I can see a plan. It was an 18-month plan. And if we take these steps, we can arrive at this way, this state. And then real life happened, and I had to scrap that thing. And when I threw it out, it opened me up. And when I opened up, I had to listen. So, when the staff that was creating—perhaps was perceived as creating—this tension, or pushing the hardest, advocating for things . . . I listened. I heard them differently, because I was open. And then I would go back to the lab, and it would inspire an idea. And I would take that—I would socialize that idea among the group, and we would iterate. So, the process has been an iterative one by which I could still maintain the synthesis from all of the one-on-ones. I can use the synthesis to be informed by what I was learning through the ongoing adaptation.

CS: You're like a vessel.

MW: Yeah. But constantly either being a barometer or a thermometer, as Dr. King would say. Checking the pulse, the temperature, checking the pressure, but also adjusting it. And doing so in partnership. It's all in relationship, because we have to move together. That's the other important lesson, Cyndi. The reason why we're not there yet—and maybe we never get there, as we talk about spiritual practice—maybe the reason we never get there is because we're always meeting people where they are. And so, I'm scanning the

group to see who is an outlier, and making sure they feel connected. What do we need to do to make sure they feel seen, held, and heard? And that requires an action. So, I can't move ahead too fast without making sure that everyone else is coming along, feeling heard. Am I moving too fast to where I didn't hear someone? Let me double-check. So, now I'm circling back. And I'm checking in with everyone to see, What has become clearer to you through the process that we haven't addressed so far? So, that is how we are moving. And that is creating a different kind of credibility for GEO.

The unfortunate part is that so much of this organizational alignment work goes unseen by external audiences. I made a commitment in 2020 to use the time—when the pandemic shut everything down—to focus on our internal workforce culture, to spend the time and resources to build relationships, to support individual progress and growth, so that we can then get to the external work. And at the time, I was expecting, like, Oh, this will just be a year or so. But we spent that time. I made that investment. Along the way, we got the MacKenzie Scott grant. So, I had some additional capital resources, much of which are directed into really transforming spaces, bringing in consultants to make sure we have organizational alignment (for example, Sheryl Petty's work).¹⁰ To make sure that we were looking at the relationship among folks on a senior leadership level, director level, different levels within the organization . . . making sure that compensation was following an equitable process. All of that is what the staff of GEO have done in service of the GEO community. Why is that important? Because, prior to this, GEO didn't maintain an explicit body of work around racial equity. We weren't expert in it. But now we've accrued meaningful experience, and we develop more each day. Now we can tell you firsthand what equitable operations can look like in practice, because we do it—so far, we've changed more than 30 policies around HR.

CS: Like what?

MW: I've got a running list of the things right here that I read on a regular basis. So, yeah, one of them, for example, is reframing sick leave to wellness leave, and making sure that the team members use leave time to support their wellbeing in a more generative and broad way. So, the definitions were loosened.

CS: You don't have to be sick to take time off.

MW: Yeah. We increased the monthly transportation benefit to \$100 a month, and added parking to that. And that's just based upon feedback from the team. We eliminated the year-end rollover process for leave, to where now you can accumulate leave over time. Because people were being penalized for not taking time off within the more restrictive space of a year. We said, "What if we go two or three years?" We just consider that in our calculator. And there are so many of these things. We eliminated a 30-day waiting period for new hires to enroll in healthcare—stuff like that. Those are equitable practices. The newest folks in the game can generate the same benefits as the people who have been on staff the longest. So, we just systematically have done so. And these are just the 1, 2, 3, 10, 15 things that I keep on my desk right next to me.

CS: So, I want to go back to something you said. You said that we're not there yet, but we're in a different place. And I want to get a sense of what "there" is for you, or for the team—and where do you feel like you are now?

MW: Oh, I love it. "There," for me, is very specific to the commitment that I made to myself to support GEO, when I started in 2019. That's to stabilize the organization, to support the individuals within the organization to be fully competent and able to realize their professional goals and ambitions, and to position GEO as a catalyst for change in the philanthropic sector that brought together the best of what other PSOs [philanthropy-serving organizations] across the ecosystem also had to offer. Period. (I've never said that before, and it came out so clearly—I trusted that it would.) And so, that's what "there" means for Marcus. The beauty of this is that "there," for staff, evolves. Staff is consistently and routinely engaged in the cocreation of what's possible through GEO—they're given a set of parameters that are aligned with the mission. And so, it *should* change. As we attempt certain things and get clear about things over here, and deepen our practice together, other things should become clearer. It's iterative in that way. And that practice is guiding our approach. The insight from participants as well as practitioners is what we prioritize to determine what's next for the GEO community. So, it goes beyond Marcus. Marcus has provided a context within which this stuff can happen. And I make sure that I'm fully allocating the time and the appropriate level of resources, and providing people with the space to thrive. So, I do space clearing—looking for barriers,

"I make sure that I'm fully allocating the time and the appropriate level of resources, and providing people with the space to thrive. So, I do space clearing—looking for barriers, hang-ups, bottlenecks . . . removing those so that people can bring their best to our work."

hang-ups, bottlenecks . . . removing those so that people can bring their best to our work. Establishing a routine, building trust among staff, and being able to then do the same with the board, and being able to then invite the ecosystem of partners and colleagues into something that feels like what I just described.

So, we had to be that first. You've got to be the change that you want to see. And we've done it on both the staff and board level, in the two and a half, three years that I've been here. Now, following the national conference, which was a critical milestone for us, it's to continue to produce the kind of work in terms of products, as well as programming and experiences, that reflect that for external audiences as well.

CS: So, can you tell me about the conference? Because I sensed a big difference, and I can tell now from what you're saying that that was maybe your first foray into bringing in the public. I'm wondering, How did you do that? Because I have my own experience as a participant, but I'm wondering what you were thinking or hoping that people would experience. I'm just wondering, Is the conference like a capstone-type thing in the organization? And it's all to there and now from that? Because it is every two years, right?

MW: Every two years, yeah. So, I like the idea of a capstone, because that's probably the term that resonates most with me. I think, in our spaces—philanthropic spaces—we may have too many conferences, if I can say that, or the conference spaces might be used with a different intention. So, what I mean by that is, as much as the posture of GEO was

very explicit and intentional for the last national conference, it still felt like a traditional conference in many ways. And I think what we can look forward to is being clearer about the purpose of a conference: What's the intent? What do we want to happen as a result of these resources coming to bear in that form? And how might we do that in a different way that perhaps has a geographic dispersion?

CS: You say you had a posture. Can you tell me a little bit about what the posture was that you were taking that was different?

MW: Yeah, the posture was: learning is important. So, coming together to learn still has value. We are building upon the historic reputation and function of GEO. And we have a point of view. So, it's not just about consuming information and then doing whatever you want. Though, it never was! If you want to be most effective, here's what we are learning is included within the most effective set of practices, strategies, ways of thinking and being, as it relates to leading change for the greater good, the greater societal good. That expression of "leading change" to direct philanthropic leverage for the greater societal good wasn't always explicitly connected to the role of an effective grantmaker. We are doing that. And what I'm saying, and what the GEO community is reinforcing, is: "Grantmaker, you have power. And you are obligated. It is your obligation to cultivate that power in partnership with the other folks across the ecosystem (especially within your community locally) to imagine what's possible, to design and conceptualize new strategies for change"—and that we are committed to change. No one is satisfied with the status quo.

CS: So, GEO is no longer just about effectiveness?

“What I’m saying—and what the GEO community is reinforcing—is: ‘Grantmaker, you have power. And you are obligated. It is your obligation to cultivate that power in partnership with the other folks across the ecosystem.’”

MW: No, no. We are always about effectiveness *and* we are underscoring that effectiveness is about change. In order to contribute to change, we also now have to practice and embody leadership. And, oh, my gosh, leadership is different from management, because management operates in the known sciences of organizational structure. But leadership is about moving through the unknown. It's dealing with uncertainty, it's grounded in change. It's a discipline of responding to disruption.

CS: You're basically creating a space for transformation.

MW: That's it.

CS: This is really interesting, because I've been studying transformation for a while. You know, it's very fascinating.

MW: It's tricky.

CS: Very. Because it's like you're trying to go toward a place that you don't know what it is yet, right?

MW: Every time. It's so elusive, because of that very thing. And it can be scary. We're dealing with fear. So, it serves GEO to be a space that welcomes every emotional state, including postures of resistance, and systematically work with people to acknowledge and release those postures. "Moving through" is how I have often referred to this process. We move through adversity. We don't avoid it—we don't even necessarily eliminate it, Cyndi. We acknowledge and move through. And then we notice whatever is present. What's clear to us from here? What's possible for living beyond those constructs that restricted us, restricted our capacity to dream and to thrive?

CS: I had a friend who does this work, and he calls himself a transformational consultant. And he would always be upset, because people would have all these issues in his space. And I told him, You call yourself a transformational consultant, so you have to understand the process of transformation. So, the way that I described it was comparing it to hiking. You are taking people on this treacherous trail to go up to the top so you can see something that you can't see from where you are. You gotta be like, "Around this corner, don't look down. . . ."

MW: That's right.

CS: "There's gonna be a hook; you're gonna have to lift your left leg." You have to almost preface and anticipate as much as possible. Imagine there's a fog on that mountain, right?

That's what you're doing, right?

MW: Let me add this to that amazing, amazing frame. While you're doing that, what we know is that sensemaking occurs in community. We make sense of our experiences with other people. And so, going it alone, it's only going to make the journey more treacherous. So, we have to take a pause and engage people in a process of: "So, you just turned that corner, we just went up that hill, how does that feel? What do you notice now? What is different now from before you started that? How was that burning-in-your-legs sensation? How did you respond to that?" So, the self-awareness is—oh, I love it. . . .

CS: I want to get back to this idea of the learning that's necessary and the role of conferences in that. Because I agree. I'm not a fan of conferences. I go to very few. And the ones I go to are the ones that I feel like I'm actually going to get something from. They all have the same structure, for the most part. I love that you guys did the talks, those 20-minute talks, because I'm always looking for different structures. I think part of what makes it easier to curate spaces—at least for me—is that I'm such a critic. I'm like: Wow, this sucks. (*Internally*. I don't tell that to people.) But I'm like, Why am I even here? I got on a plane, I'm in a hotel, I didn't get anything out of this. When I had to design the Edge Leadership R+D space at NPQ, I thought: What kind of space would I want to be at that would actually be exciting? One of my guiding design principles is that complexity needs simplicity, in terms of structure. So, I was like, Okay, we're going to have a really simple structure, and there are three things that we're going to do across the day, but there are going to be three different ways to do it. And so, I studied the different ways that you shift culture. And there were three things: there's a space for semiotics, which is thinking/words; a space for building, creating the forms we need; and a space for performativity, where people can start enacting and playing physically with what they're trying to do. So, we rented a beautiful museum in Harlem, the Sugar Hill Museum of Art & Storytelling. They had a huge room. We hired a band to create a soundscape as people came in. We did everything so that people could shift, because we wanted them to shift while they were in that space—so, I had to create a feeling that when you came into the space, it was a different space. We welcomed participants when they came in and told them, "This is the semiotic space; this is the materiality space; and over there is the performativity space. You can be in any

“Many people and schools of thought affirm the value of including a focus on aspiration, possibility, what you want to experience or create, optimally. As human beings, this impacts our attitude, moods, emotions, as well as our beliefs about what is actually possible.”

space; we'll be doing the same thing across all three, just in different modalities.” And you could switch at any time.

MW: Yeah, yeah, that's the key, though. Same thing, different modalities.

CS: They did not have to stay in one modality. I wrote a report about what we learned: People immediately knew that this was different. It has been said that if you want people to think different, you have to tell them that this is different. You have to act like it's different. So, people came in, there was food, there was art everywhere, and spaciousness. It was interesting how it worked out. I remember my program officer from Ford went to the performativity space. Later, when we debriefed, many participants shared that they thought that the performativity space was the scariest. But they also noticed that participants were having the most fun in that space. There was a lot of laughing. The semiotic space started with looking at the barriers for leaders of color. They never moved from that.

MW: But you know, it's both myopic as well as ineffective to focus exclusively on barriers. Many people and schools of thought affirm the value of including a focus on aspiration, possibility, what you want to experience or create, optimally. As human beings, this impacts our attitude, moods, emotions, as well as our beliefs about what is actually possible. It is generative!

CS: They intended that, but they didn't start with that. Some people were mad. They had never had a space where they could process how they felt about all the barriers. The funders in the materiality space realized they didn't know what to build. So, eventually, the people in the materiality space

moved. They started to watch the other spaces. They said, “We don’t know what to build without anyone else. So, we can’t be building.” The performativity space moved through the agenda at twice the rate as the other two groups. Once people were encouraged to act different, and were told, “Here’s a way that you could do it, here are some games,” they just did it. So, one of them came forward with a challenge that he had at work. And we played a game called “Sit, Stand, Kneel,” where you have to shift your posture in response to what you say to the people who you’re talking to, according to shifts in power. And then he just started to come up with solutions, because he had to in order to move. So, it was really, really interesting. And so, I think about spaces a lot like that. And I’m wondering . . . NPQ used to host conferences, and now people are asking us to do that again. And conferences are a lot of work and a lot of money to put together.

MW: That’s the whole other thing. Sometimes it can feel like a waste of money!

CS: It’s a lot of money.

MW: I mean, relative to that money going into a singular experience . . . I want to invest that to yield a compound impact.

CS: Right, right. I mean, I’m not saying it’s bad, but it *is* a lot of money. Not just for the hosting organization but for everyone who participates, right? And for the earth, with everybody flying, right? I used to work at this organization a long time ago, a strategy center. And when we hosted conferences, the conferences’ visioning and strategy spaces for the field, it’d still be like 200 people, but everything was designed around workshops about things that people were going to do when they went back. And when they came, it started off with people presenting about what they had learned from before. So, it was very action based, and we included funders.

MW: So, do me a favor. Just as you do that, see GEO as a space that you are welcome to re-create. Let’s test something out together.

CS: Well, that’s what I was wondering. I’m thinking about *how*—because one of the things that I really want to move NPQ to doing is more directly talk to philanthropy.

MW: That’s what I’m trying to do, too. I’m exploring everything with you to try to figure out how we can direct this message, this conversation . . . and I couldn’t even say it

right, there . . . have a conversation with philanthropy that *moves* us. That’s what I desperately seek. And Cyndi, we’re in our strategic planning process right now. I want you—I’m *asking* you, in this recorded conversation—to bring this idea that we’re talking about right now, around how we organize space, into our strategic pillar. I think we should be transforming spaces. Our mission is transforming philanthropic culture and practices!

CS: Invite me to your spaces. Let’s figure out how to do that.

MW: But that’s the thing: I had to learn. My first year, my first two years, was learning how GEO functioned in order to understand how it was *not* functioning, how it was *malfunctioning*. So it just took all of that time—it takes a long time. Reverse engineering, right? So, I’m just now *there*, to say, like, Ah, now I know the *whos* and the *hows* and the *whats*. How do I get you in a process early enough to inform the design? So, right now, I’m saying that the next opportunity is LA 2024—the next national conference.

CS: Let’s do that.

MW: It’s going to be a multimonth process. I know it is. 2024 might be a first iteration.

CS: What about if we did this another way? Remember, we talked about this before? The way that NPQ approaches the work is working at the different levels our readers are at. We design differently for three levels: fundamentals, practitioners, and edge. The fundamentals level is the people who are just trying to learn something.

“The practitioners are people who already know a lot of this stuff. And what they want is the nuance and multiplicity, the connection to other people. How can they become better and better at whatever it is? How do they share what they know? And how do they get recognized and get resourced?”

MW: Supersmart, yeah.

CS: We don't invest a lot in fundamentals. We create one-way conversations. We do webinars, we write articles, we have different ways of capturing the content. We organize, we curate, and readers take it in. The practitioners are people who already know a lot of this stuff. And what they want is the nuance and multiplicity, the connection to other people. How can they become better and better at whatever it is? How do they share what they know? And how do they get recognized and get resourced? So, that level is the second level for us, and we invest more in that level. But then we also invest in the edge. Those are the people who are ready to create the next iteration of the work. So, the people at the edge are the people who we convene. Those are the closed circles that you've been part of. Those are the people who get fellowships. Those are the people who can come to us with a crazy idea and we'll fund them to experiment on it and to publicize it so it becomes a known thing. That's why I had the series of micro films that we funded. And it created a whole thing. Interestingly enough, the most popular one is the one about philanthropy.

MW: I'm not surprised.

CS: I don't know if you saw it, but it's kind of controversial: *Swinging Philanthropy Dick Is Indecent*.¹¹ It's based on the idea that abusing philanthropic power is indecent; that the culture that philanthropy creates with those norms is indecent.

MW: So, that's a great example. One possibility for GEO is to be a space for folks to grapple with those insights, but to use art. That's a new way of introducing dissonance, introducing a provocative way of thinking or an invitation to shift orientation. That's what I actually want to do. And I think that's what we can do right now. To your point, though, philanthropy is not at the edge. Philanthropy has been operating from the fundamentals level. It's not even the practitioners' level. GEO is perhaps at the practitioners' level, but not consistently. And we don't even go to the edge yet.

CS: Well, you know, it's really interesting, because I wonder if there are elements that are at the edge that just haven't had a chance to show up because the cultures can be so stifling. So, what if we did something? Because I often think . . .

MW: We can do that!

“In *Design as Politics*, Tony Fry writes about how what we design is political. He talks about why it's so important to focus on the edge and to fund it to some extent, because even though it's a small portion—usually it's about 5 percent of people who are there—he argues that you don't need any more than that.”

CS: In *Design as Politics*, Tony Fry writes about how what we design is political.¹² He talks about why it's so important to focus on the edge and to fund it to some extent, because even though it's a small portion—usually it's about 5 percent of people who are there—he argues that you don't need any more than that.

MW: It's always a small group.

CS: Always. And practitioners actually want that. When I talk about it, practitioners often say to me, “I know that I'm not at the edge, but I want to be next to the people who are at the edge, because I want to see where they're going, where we're heading.” I always imagine, What would it look like in a conference space to actually highlight the edge and to have everybody watch, so that they can go back and see from where they are? They don't have to *be* at the edge, but how does knowing that that's the edge influence what they do?

MW: No, I like that. Cyndi, there are colleague organizations that are more focused on edge. GEO—remember what I said earlier—we're intentional about being the mainstream space. And so, we should be a constellation of all of them, with a primary percentage—the proportional majority—being kind of toward practitioners but acknowledging that it's a whole lot of fundamentals level in there, and that people are going to be evolving through that.

CS: I feel like you did that at the conference. When I was there, I was thinking there should be levels. And the reason why—and some people don't like this—but the reason why I think it's important to have levels is because it's important

for people to situate themselves. At the conference, one thing that for me was really clear was which track was their fast track and which track was fundamental.

MW: You're right. I'm going to affirm you in saying I didn't have a heavy hand. I didn't have the influence that I have now in that design. But what we did agree on is that we need something for folks who have already been practicing but are still developing proficiency. And we need to speak to . . . it's the old "awake to woke to work." We need folks at different developmental stages. So, we were trying to provide developmentally appropriate experiences and resources for practice.

CS: And you did it. There were certain rooms that I went into, and I was like, Oh, this isn't my room.

MW: There was a reparations room—that's still the edge for a lot of funders—but it was a very good one. There was a lot of traction around how the Evanston Community Foundation is doing their reparations work. It's not as scary as it once was. And I think it's becoming more of a mainstream conversation.

CS: I did an article last year on Black funds.¹³ Many readers responded to that article. One told us there are over 100 of them now.

MW: Whoa, yeah, they've started to increase a lot in the last three years.

CS: It's pretty radical to have Black funds. I mean, I've been seeing a few of them. I didn't realize it was way more widespread.

MW: I'm telling you . . . I've been searching with you around this. You've been so patient, thank you. The reason I want to take the time and get this—and I don't mean *perfect* . . . but make sure that we're bringing something that we can offer consistently—is because GEO is operating from its strength, and in order to do that, I had to set the table over these past couple of years. And we have that in place now. So, we can provide the infrastructure for you and whomever the other colleagues are, to be the creative guides. You've got the vision; our folks are interested in the execution, and they want to become practitioners. They want to get really good at this thing that we're talking about.

CS: I love the idea, because I've heard a lot of people, including funders, talking about this, about the need to really move

“You asked how I did whatever I've been able to do so far at GEO—and it's by being a learner. By shifting my orientation—constantly. The practice is the discipline of orienting myself into the learning posture.”

the funding space, and I get why it's in the fundamentals space. It's to be expected. And I love what you said about the intimacy not being in their personal lives and then being asked to do that, because that is so real.

MW: Yeah. And Cyndi, you asked how I did whatever I've been able to do so far at GEO—and it's by being a learner. By shifting my orientation—constantly. The practice is the discipline of orienting myself into the learning posture. It just is—because everything is a synthesis. It's informed by the people who are right there. The real thing that we're trying to do, I believe, is tap into the collective genius of the people who are in a particular situation, who are involved. They're there because they have all of the pieces that are required to build that puzzle. That particular puzzle in that moment can be built by everyone involved in that. I believe that. That's the spiritual practice. It has taught me that. And you being present with me over the years of our relationship, and the changes that I've been able to witness? Oh, my gosh. I remember being in your office. It wasn't even painted the same color. I remember being with you in Boston. We've invested time with each other. That's what we want to offer to our colleagues in the field, right? It's not just a job. It's a lifestyle.

CS: Well, we can invite them into it, because I think that that's a really high-level invitation. Do you know Peter Block's book?

MW: *Community*.¹⁴

CS: *Community*, right. He talks about the invitation. How sometimes when you tell people, “This may not be for you, these are the hurdles,” that actually makes it more enticing for the people who are ready.

MW: So, what if we think about piloting? That's the last thing that occurs to me to share. In order for us to move on

the moment, what might we pilot on a smaller scale in the near term?

CS: You know, honestly, I think of it as experimenting. It's funny, because I think you and I have a lot of similarities, but we also have different approaches. And I think that's what makes it good, because you're like, "I've gotta go slow," and I'm just always moving really fast. But it's good. It's good. I like that. I feel like groups need to have this kind of difference of approach.

MW: I agree. And I always surround myself with people like you. I do. I do it intentionally, because I can be like that, but I'm more impetuous. And so, when I slow down. . . .

CS: It takes a lot of patience, Marcus, so I salute you on that.

MW: But I salute *you*, because I can't move that fast or else I start skipping steps and I don't bring my best. When I slow down, that's when the magic happens. Yeah.

CS: So, one thing that I think we could do: I have been playing around with this idea of a VoiceLab for funders to deal with race—racial justice in philanthropy. Funders have been asking us for this. And I wonder . . . I've been hesitant, because

it takes a lot to host a VoiceLab. But I would host one like this. And it could actually be less intensive than the first one I did, which was for leaders of color who were articulating new ideas and creating new forms.¹⁵ It could meet just once a month. We could really make it manageable. But what if we had a VoiceLab that people—funders—opted into that leads up to the next conference?

MW: Ohh!

CS: Right? So that next conference, somehow . . . maybe it's a track or something—maybe it's like the keynote . . . I don't know. But let's give people first an opportunity to grapple. They don't have to be at the edge, but if they want to try to be at the edge, and we could talk about things . . . I mean, it could be a space where we talk about power but we also talk about what their experiences are. And we just ideate a lot and really try out things and see—with the idea that what we're doing is preparing for this conference next year.

MW: That, Cyndi, is beautiful. I would even say, not only are we preparing for the conference but we're preparing ourselves for the leadership journey that the era is revealing.

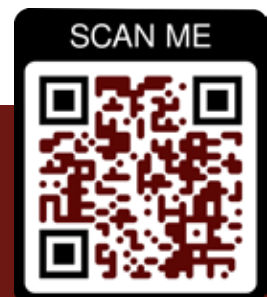


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“I’m committed to this infrastructure serving this shared vision that we have around living beyond the constructs—because that’s where people want to be.”

This is revelatory. You know that whole emergent strategy . . . this is what it means to be in emergence. Alignment. To lead in a completely different way.

CS: Totally. Just like the pro-Black work we started last year. I mean, we have a book coming out this summer that came from a conversation last year around this same time, where we hosted a conversation on what needs to happen for us to really advance the DEI/Racial Justice work. And people immediately said, “We need to start talking about pro-Black.” But they also thought, “We can’t do that.” And I was like, “Well, we are gonna do it.” And they were like, “We are?” We didn’t even know if we knew anything about it. What do we know about that? We had to get a different binding for that issue because it was so big. Collectively, we actually did know a lot about it.

MW: See, that’s so bold. I love it. I’ve seen you do this.

CS: Oh, my god, Marcus. And you know I brought those magazines to your conference, right? Like, they went like *that*. [Snaps fingers.]

MW: Is that the one with the woman, like, the mosaic? I keep that!

CS: Everybody loves that. That was our most popular issue in the history of the magazine.

MW: My goodness, this thing is right around here somewhere. I look at this thing every day.

CS: Everybody tells me this. I would go to conferences and people would tell me that they kept the magazine next to their beds, or read it in the morning, for inspiration, especially given the context we’re experiencing. And people wanted the hard copy, Marcus. It wasn’t enough just to read the articles online.

MW: That’s right. And this voice lab idea? If I’m understanding this correctly, the voice lab would involve the Maurice

Mitchells—like, we would have all these guests come. I think of it as Friends of Cyndi.

CS: It could be, yeah. But we would definitely have a space where people would be hearing what the field wants.

MW: That’s what we want, that’s what we want.

CS: And then people would be having space to think about that and to talk honestly about what that feels like for them, and to experiment.

MW: I’m saying yes, because we got approval and support to do work that contributes to racial healing. I’m defining racial healing as addressing the disproportionate impact of inequities on individuals toward being able to live beyond constructs, toward being able to shift our orientation toward a more liberated stance, a more creative stance for thriving. And so, this voice lab, to me, it’s really like a platform to facilitate racial healing. So, it’s like that. It’s racial equity, healing, and reconciliation. That’s the framework that is starting to evolve in my most recent iteration of this work. Because equity is one step. It’s an analysis, it’s a set of practices, it contributes to and involves healing. And then once we heal, we can engage in some active reconciliation, because it takes all hands on deck to realize the potential of this nation. It won’t be just a group of Black people that’s gonna bring this nation to its fullness. It’s gonna be all folks grappling with the impacts of inequity on how they think about what’s possible, and releasing ourselves from these scarcity mindsets and other limitations. I’m committed to this infrastructure serving this shared vision that we have around living beyond the constructs—because that’s where people want to be.

CS: I think that’s gonna be the title of this interview.

MW: Let’s go!

CS: All right. Thank you. As you share two hours. . . .

MW: I prepare for that when I talk to you, because it’s real. Listen, this is the energy practice that we talked about. We are raising consciousness, our own consciousness, expanding and allowing for that revelatory force to come forward. I know that’s what happens when we get together. So, respect.

CS: Take care, Marcus. Big hug to you. I’ll talk to you soon.

MW: You, too. Thank you.

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Leadership Is Voice

by Cyndi Suarez

■
To speak truth for social change and human evolution, we need rituals, practices that allow us to go deep into our self and beyond to higher levels of consciousness and reality, where truth resides. Developing facility in these realms builds the trust and faith that allow us to access truth and withstand and overcome the risks of speaking.

O

ne of the most powerful things we can do as leaders is to cultivate our voice, especially now, as old narratives and structures give way to an as-yet-undefined future.

In *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power*, Robert K. Greenleaf asserts that prophetic voice—the voice that articulates what has yet to be said but is necessary for progress—is the highest form of leadership. He writes,

I now embrace the theory of prophecy, which holds that prophetic voices of great clarity, and with a quality of insight equal to that of any age, are speaking cogently all of the time. Men and women of a stature equal to the greatest of the past are with us now addressing the problems of the day and pointing to a better way and to a personage better able to live fully and serenely in these times.¹

Social change leaders, in particular, have a duty to connect with and speak truth.

■
Recently, I went to New York City to film a video² with Maurice (Moe) Mitchell that introduces his beautiful intervention article “Building Resilient Organizations: Toward Joy and Durable Power in a Time of Crisis.”³ When he said to me, “I stand behind this,” I responded, “Yes! Yes!” Leaders *should* speak words that they can stand behind.

Nowadays, leaders are not only afraid to lose their position if they speak but are also afraid that people will disagree with them on social media. However, the priority for social change leaders should be clarity with the Self and a commitment to speak for social change. It is not about making everyone happy. This is what Moe did. Of course, he protected himself. He did the work. He built a large network with whom he consulted for resonance, breadth, and depth. He met with over 60 people for about six months to fine-tune what he wrote. He did not shy away from the truth that needed to be spoken.



Subordinated realities, those driven underground and into the subconscious, are not linear. They are multiple, time traveling, dimension crossing—and bigger than the dominant narrative. Accessing and integrating these hidden dimensions makes us whole, and enables authentic voice.



Of course, it is no small feat to ground oneself in truth, especially when one is positioned as subordinate in society. In “Voice under Domination,” I write

Knowing one’s self is intimately tied to the ability to speak, to language one’s reality. But for those positioned as subordinate in a system, this is precisely what is subverted. . . . Becoming oneself, being authentic, when one is positioned as subordinate in a system is to challenge it at its core.⁴



Subordinated realities, those driven underground and into the subconscious, are not linear. They are multiple, time traveling, dimension crossing—and bigger than the dominant narrative. Accessing and integrating these hidden dimensions makes us whole, and enables authentic voice.

The second season of HBO’s *Random Acts of Flyness*, by Terence Nance, focuses on the metaphysics of Black life via vignettes strung together to give voice to the healing process of the protagonists, Terence and his creative, and former romantic, partner Najja.⁵ While Najja is wrapping up the development of a videogame comprising healing rituals, Terence is creating a reparations app. They are both seeking to recover something of value that was lost.

This is not an easy task and the approach is one of montages and overlapping, sometimes contradictory, voices. Richard Brody, writing for the *New Yorker*, notes, “Straightforward dialogue sequences of confrontations and arguments are expanded with echoing and overlapping voices, phantom presences; characters are multiplied and double-exposed and superimposed; faces are transformed, tinted, digitally masked.”⁶

In an interview in *The Hollywood Reporter* titled “Terence Nance on the Rituals Behind the Return of ‘Random Acts of Flyness,’” Nance speaks to the challenge of speaking in systems that are narrower than one’s realities.

Those protocols are not in service of the thing I’m in service of. I’m trying to make something that honors my ancestors and really shifts consciousness toward us reinitiating ourselves through ritual and inter-ritual and even progressing that . . . and that is not in the set of interests of the protocol [in terms of what] needs to be released. I just think that in a very existential way, resistance takes all kinds of forms. And that’s one external form it takes.

I think, particularly with the TV resistance, the fact that I work at a place that has protocols that I could find a way into, the lesson there is just to know that my ability to get *Random Acts of Flyness: The Parable of the Pirate and the King* on HBO, is a result of the rituals that I do. It’s not because of some strategy I have or a certain amount of power in the earth realm. It’s an ethereal and spiritual challenge that is being strategized upon and acted upon in a spiritual and ethereal place. It’s protected there, and that’s why it’s happening. And to have a level of faith to always turn to that methodology, when I face resistance, is a discipline.⁷



To speak truth for social change and human evolution, we need rituals, practices that allow us to go deep into our self and beyond to higher levels of consciousness and reality, where truth resides. Developing facility in these realms builds the trust and faith that allow us to access truth and withstand and overcome the risks of speaking.

In *Fearless Speech*, Western philosopher of power Michel Foucault notes that, historically, people have been concerned with identifying truth, or *parrhesia*. Foucault defines *parrhesia* as,

[A] kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his [sic] own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself [sic] or other people through criticism . . . , and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty.⁸

Thus, the five core elements of *parrhesia* are:

- Frankness Direct speech, where nothing is hidden, no rhetoric is used, and what is said perfectly aligns with the speaker's beliefs
- Truth The speaker has the moral qualities needed to know the truth and the ability to convey it
- Danger There is a status difference between the speaker and those who are spoken to, so there is risk involved for the speaker, but the speaker is masterful at navigating it
- Criticism The speaker criticizes self and others
- Duty The speaker is driven by a sense of duty to living in truth, juxtaposed with self-interest and moral apathy—truth telling is a way of being

Parrhesia developed in contrast to *rhetoric*, defined as “continuous long speech” that seeks to intensify emotions and influence the listener.⁹ Instead, the major technique of *parrhesia* is dialogue. Foucault observes that the term *parrhesia* first appears in the fourth century BCE, in the context of politics. He writes, “*parrhesia* was a guideline for democracy as well as an ethical and personal attitude characteristic of the good citizen.”¹⁰ It was “a requisite for public speech, [which] takes place between citizens as individuals, and also between citizens construed as an assembly.”¹¹

A person who has the ability to use *parrhesia* is called a *parrhesiastes*. Originally, there were three qualifications for someone to be able to use *parrhesia*: they had to be a good citizen, well born, and have a respectful relationship to the city, law, and truth. However, as democracy began to take hold, *parrhesia* was problematized by an aristocracy that claimed that real *parrhesia* cannot exist in a democracy, where anyone can speak. The democratization of voice was problematized, as the qualifications for *parrhesia* no longer held.

Consequently, the concept of *parrhesia* was altered, and by the end of the fifth century, *parrhesia* has moved from the political sphere to the philosophical, and becomes concerned with what Foucault terms “care of oneself,” and connected to Socrates, who personified this new form.¹² Foucault identifies three characteristics of this new *parrhesia*.

First, **the new *parrhesia* is philosophical**, rather than strictly political.

[T]he decisive criterion which identifies the *parrhesiastes* is not to be found in his [sic] birth, nor in his [sic] citizenship, nor in his [sic] intellectual competence, but in the harmony which exists between his [sic] *logos* and his [sic] *bios*.¹³

Thus, there is little to no gap between what we know and how we lead our life. This approach was most prominent in the Cynic tradition, which lasted centuries, “from the end of the First Century B.C. to the Fourth Century A.D.,” and spread its philosophies via stories of exemplary lives versus text or doctrine.¹⁴ The Cynics emphasized “philosophy as an art of life.”¹⁵

Second, **the target of *parrhesia* is relationships between people**, rather than between citizens and rulers.

[T]he target of this new *parrhesia* is not to persuade the Assembly, but to convince someone that he [sic] must take care of himself [sic] and of others; and this means that he [sic] must *change his [sic] life*.¹⁶

The goal moves beyond changing another's mind to changing how they live their life, particularly how they relate to their self and others.

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Third, the focus of *parrhesia* is the relationship between self and truth, rather than between self and one who has power over us.

[T]hese new parrhesiastic practices imply a complex set of connections between the self and truth. For not only are these practices supposed to endow the individual with self-knowledge, this self-knowledge in turn is supposed to grant access to truth and further knowledge.¹⁷

The goal, then, is to internalize the parrhesiastic struggle, to develop a relationship between self and truth. For Foucault, the “truth game . . . now consists in being courageous enough to disclose the truth about *oneself*.”¹⁸

With these shifts, the type of technique also shifted from a focus on dialogue to practices that promote self-knowledge. Foucault notes, “this art of living, demands practice and training.”¹⁹ This approach is akin to spiritual practice, which Foucault calls the “technique of techniques.”²⁰ While there are many such practices, Foucault wraps up his exposition on truth telling with three core techniques of examination.

Solitary Self-examination Harmonizing principles and actions

An evening examination in which one sifts through the whole day to identify “inefficient actions requiring adjustments between ends and means”²¹—praising and admonishing the self—so that one may “reactivate various rules and maxims in order to make them more vivid, permanent, and effective for future behavior”²²

Self-diagnosis Harmonizing thoughts and chosen ethical structure

General self-scrutiny with the goal of “steadiness of mind,”²³ described as “a state where the mind is independent of any kind of external event, and is free as well from any internal excitation or agitation that could induce an involuntary movement of mind”²⁴; this state “denotes stability, self-sovereignty, and independence”²⁵; the goal is “complete self-possession or self-mastery”²⁶

Guiding questions include: “[W]hat are the things that are important to me, and what are the things to which I am indifferent?”²⁷ and, Is the mind still involuntarily moved or aroused by that which is deemed unimportant?

Self-testing Sovereignty of thoughts

The work is in determining the origin and value of one’s thoughts, which requires “a constant putting on trial of all our representations” in order “to distinguish those representations that [one] can control from those that [one] cannot control, that incite involuntary emotions, feelings, behavior[s]”²⁸

The goal of all techniques of examination is self-sovereignty—having the agency to choose what one thinks, how one acts, who one chooses to be in relationship with, and the effect of others on one’s life.

There is a reason Foucault sees truth telling as a spiritual practice. When we are spiritually guided, we do not fear that people will crush us. We know our true power is unassailable.

As social change leaders creating the world we want to live in, let us understand and nurture voice—in ourselves and others.

NOTES

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