

NPOQ

NONPROFIT QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

**“STOP DROWNING US,
AND STOP MAKING
US DISAPPEAR.”**

*A Critical Report
on the State of
Black Woman Leadership*

**LETTER FROM
THE COMBAT ZONE**



**The Impossible Dilemma of
Black Female Leadership**

**It Isn't Just Lonely at the Top—
It's Downright Scary:
The Reckoning Needed for
Black Women Leaders**

**Possibility to Power:
How Black Women Leaders
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by *Cicley Gay*



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woman, mother, wife, caregiver..., nonprofit leader, writer,

poet, an imaginative

spirit, a wildflower,

a creative soul. As

such, a traditional

narrative would

not do justice

to the pain, joy,

beauty, hope,

love, fear, despair,

and exhaustion

that come with my

everyday.”

by *Shamyle Maya Dobbs*



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WELCOME



Dear Readers,

This edition of *Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine* is a resounding *no* in the face of the travesty that Black women leaders, and other women of color leaders, have been contending with in the sector.

As White-founded organizational leadership transitions out of what has more often than not been blatantly unexamined and relatively ungoverned roles in organizations, often on the brink of collapse, incoming Black women leaders are discovering that now there will be not only governance but obstructive, extreme oversight, micromanagement, unreasonable expectations, territorialism, mistrust, little to no support, lack of basic decency and humanity, and the list continues—sometimes from the board, sometimes from the staff, and sometimes from both...and that's just internally. Externally, there is also misbehavior from funders and from other leaders.

There is no place allowed, it seems, to breathe; to rest; to grow; to make mistakes, learn, and recalibrate; to be. The sector, as a number of leaders describe in this edition, is perpetrating death by a thousand cuts.

Black women in particular have always predominated in the sector—and Black women in leadership are exactly what this sector needs and should be thankful for. It makes beautiful sense, this emergent leadership. And the speedy exit, which, make no mistake, will happen if things continue as they are, will also make sense—in this case, tragic. The tragedy, though, is the sector's. Black women know how to say *no*—and tragedy is simply not something we will be taking on for anybody or anything. Joy and wellbeing and empowerment for all? Certainly. But apparently, the world isn't ready for that.

Black women leaders are being harassed, forced out, made severely ill, and are even dying. As Dr. Shauna Knox demands within: “Stop drowning us, and stop making us disappear.”

Is the sector listening?

Cyndi Suarez
President and Editor in Chief
NPQ

Letter from the Combat Zone

by *Anonymous*

■
When I tell you
I'm working
in a hostile work
environment,
believe me.
■

Let me begin by saying *thank you* to NPQ for acknowledging out loud the unfortunate need for this article, in your invitation to Black women leaders to contribute on the topic of setting the record straight regarding the experience of Black women leaders today.

I am confident that others will read about, but not fully process, the pain to which they've contributed that will fill the submissions sent in response to this invitation. This is my third iteration of 14 double-sided, legal-size pages. I had hoped to condense this to something that allowed both my rage to seep away and my hope to fill the space left behind.

Since seeing the invitation, I have grabbed every opportunity to write down the indignities that have happened to me over my 30-plus-years professional career, and especially in my leadership positions. I can't stop writing because I am confident that, until I retire, I will continue to experience the microaggressions, blatant racist comments, questioning of my decisions ("I only asked your supervisor to make sure you were doing the right thing"), and snide comments ("How did you know that? Even I didn't know that").

Upon being asked to implement a policy that, once rolled out, the team balked at and complained about to my supervisor, I was thrown under the bus as "having implemented something that was discussed as *possible*, not actual." (I have been thrown under the bus by staff and supervisors so many times, all of my clothes look the same.) One of my "favorite" indignities was when the older White administrative assistant asked me how I could afford to live somewhere she couldn't





**I'll humor you and
do what my ancestors
used to do about their
freedom—I'll dream:
What could be better?
Everything!!**

afford to live. Another was when I walked into an interview, and the White woman said aloud, with “requisite” shock on her face, “I wasn’t expecting to see *you*.” (I guess my resume and skin color just didn’t add up for her.) She had no shame, never even apologized, because I’m sure she thought I was too ignorant to understand her insult. I have had objects in my office moved around, stolen, and broken. I have been left off of emails containing crucial information and then asked why I “didn’t know,” since “everyone” had been informed. I have had a picture of a female orangutan hung outside my office. I’ve been asked to “smile” so that others could feel comfortable around me. And I’ve been told, “We didn’t have a problem with ‘our Blacks’ before you came here!” (Yeah, let that resonate with you for a moment....)

I have several years’ experience in a variety of modalities, because in human services, clients/consumers are not one-dimensional: I’ve been hired for my experience in working with hard-to-reach populations and my ability to work with challenging staff and help them to move on to a more receptive location. But it’s never without a fight—from the very people who hire me to do what they ask me to do.

I’ll humor you and do what my ancestors used to do about their freedom—I’ll dream: What could be better? Everything!!

Example? Stop presuming that I don’t know what I’m doing, and let me do the job I was hired to do. Let me repeat myself: **let-me-do-the-job-I-was-hired-to-do**. Stop blocking my path with half-truths and partial information, and please stop pretending to “help” me. Once I *begin* addressing the chaos and caustic behaviors, staff complain and leadership caves.

And by the way, it’s okay to share with me that one of my direct reports applied for but didn’t get the position I now hold. And if there’s an onboarding process, let me participate in it; don’t throw me in to hit the ground running (which, by the way, I can very much do, and do well) and then complain when I’m not following procedures/processes that you didn’t tell me about.

If you say you need a strong, effective leader, then stop tying my hands! Are you more interested in maintaining staff who want to be paid to socialize but not work, or in actually making the changes needed to help the folks we’re here to help? *Too many times* I’ve been hired to implement change, but not at the expense of making anyone White unhappy.

Let’s talk about paying me for the work that I’m doing in this combat environment. I am past tired of seeing White women

advance on my merits. I am tired of being called in to do what others could not, used for my expertise but not properly compensated, and having my authority challenged. How is it that when a White person holds a position, it comes with authority and requisite compensation, but when I get the same position, it's paid less (even if I have more experience and education), somehow the responsibility remains the same, the time frame to complete the tasks shortens, and most (if not all) of the authority dissipates?

When I tell you I'm working in a hostile work environment, *believe me*. It's not just something White women experience, and it's not "just in my mind." I am not "exaggerating the situation." When I respond to how I'm being treated, where White females are "passionate," I'm "the angry Black woman"—stop gaslighting me! Furthermore, my comments are not sarcastic simply because you don't see truths.

And please, do away with the pretend allies—there to help by cluttering my path.

If one more White woman starts crying when she can't get her way (which involves me doing her job and her telling me that I don't support her—???!), I will LEVITATE!

When do I get to cry, scream, act out, and have it excused? Say how I feel? Be my authentic self? Why am I always the rock? The one you know will show up when no one else does? Who you can count on, but not compensate? Not support? Not *believe*? Why is it okay for you to believe it when someone tells you I've said or done something that "sounds like" something I would've said or done, but you question me when I tell you about something someone said or did to *me*? Or worse, why is it okay for you to make excuses for that person? Why is it okay for a subordinate (usually White) to openly question me, and for you to support that and ask me to be open to transparency, but not okay for a Black staff member to question a (White) peer (for the same sake of transparency)?

I'm having a Fannie Lou Hamer moment again, because, like she said, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."¹ It's time for me to wake up. And I hope that one day, my granddaughter will experience her worth being appreciated, compensated, and unquestioned. Or, perhaps more likely, *her* granddaughter.

NOTE

1. See Lottie L. Joiner, "Remembering Civil Rights Heroine Fannie Lou Hamer: 'I'm Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired,'" *Daily Beast*, last modified April 14, 2017, www.thedailybeast.com/remembering-civil-rights-heroine-fannie-lou-hamer-im-sick-and-tired-of-being-sick-and-tired; and Jamie Gass, "Fannie Lou Hamer: 'I Am Sick And Tired Of Being Sick And Tired,'" GBH, last modified May 7, 2018, www.wgbh.org/news/commentary/2017-10-03/fannie-lou-hamer-i-am-sick-and-tired-of-being-sick-and-tired.

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The Impossible Dilemma of Black Female Leadership: The Tragedy of Nobody Seeing Us Even When Everybody's Watching

by Shauna Knox

■ The very presence of Black women leaders in the workforce is fugitive. We were never intended to function in it beyond our historically designated roles.



The very presence of Black women leaders in the workforce is fugitive. We were never intended to function in it beyond our historically designated roles in “agriculture and domestic service.”¹ Black women are systematically suppressed within the labor economy through chronic underemployment and an enduring exclusion from “employer-provided retirement plans, health insurance, paid sick and maternity leave...[and] subsidized child and elder care.”² We are overwhelmingly present in low-wage, inflexible service work, but there is a small contingent of Black women who have somehow transgressed this universal sentencing to unprotected, low-wage oblivion, and have beaten the odds only to find that the reward for their efforts is an impossible dilemma—a choice to drown or to disappear. In my essay collection on the interiority of Black women, *The Black Subaltern: An Intimate Witnessing*, I write, “If we allow ourselves to be as Black as we are, they will drown us in the darkness. If we refuse to be as Black as we are, they will make us disappear.”³



Any Black woman deemed to be an Angry Black Woman will quickly find herself shunned for this fatal flaw, castigated for the way it impacts the entitled contentment of her environment and the people in it.

A BLACK WOMAN LEADER DROWNS

In predominantly White spaces, a Black woman is expected to code-switch, mimic White culture, and either explicitly or implicitly affirm harmful propaganda about Black people, in order to signal that she can be trusted by the establishment. Beyond that, she is also expected to turn a blind eye to the presence and implications of institutional racism and its impact on herself and other Black people, both within the organization and without. If she is willing to do these things, she will be rewarded with both upward mobility and proximity to the gatekeepers that hold power within that ecosystem. Take Candace Owens, who in 2007, with the support of the NAACP, sued and settled with the Stamford Board of Education for failing to protect her from hate crimes motivated by racism.⁴ By 2019, and now functioning as a leading voice within the Republican Party, not only did Owens denounce the NAACP as “one of the worst groups for Black people”⁵ but also—in 2020—insisted that Ahmaud Arbery’s death was unrelated to his race, even after the Georgia Bureau of Investigation reported that his killer referred to him as a “fucking n—r” before killing him.⁶ Her willful and irrational denial of overt White supremacy—even in instances in which it is categorically undeniable—demonstrates, if on a farcical level, a knowing determination to barter race blindness and denialism for continued preservation of her transgressive leadership as a Black woman within a White establishment politic.

Beyond such absurdly problematic Republican party pandering, Black women who lead across industrial structures are routinely found participating in the same type of exchange. If, however, a Black woman in leadership decides that the price for the goodwill of the establishment is too high and too cutting of a self-betrayal, she will quickly find herself cast in the role of any number of prejudicial tropes—and none so pervasive as the “Angry Black Woman.” In 2022, the *Harvard*

Business Review published an article about the workforce politics that reinforce the lore of the Angry Black Woman, finding that the imagery dates back to the era of enslavement—which makes sense, since the trope justifies the belief that a Black woman’s anger results from an innate personality defect rather than from a harmful situation.⁷

Any Black woman deemed to be an Angry Black Woman will quickly find herself shunned for this fatal flaw, castigated for the way it impacts the entitled contentment of her environment and the people in it, incessantly denied the support she deserves to mitigate the issues she is contending with, and left enduringly alone, because she is intolerable and understood to be exiled to an isolation of her own making. Even the very few who can see that she is being framed by this mythology, and accordingly sympathize with her condition, will continue to avoid her, because her social standing is contagious and dangerous for their own sociopolitical situating within the establishment. So, the Black woman who leads in service of Black people, whose circumstances are in fact deeply upsetting, will invariably find herself drowning in an ocean of White discontent—and even those for whom she is sacrificing herself will not come to save her, because they know her fate is certain, and they are fighting to survive.

This drowning of Black women leaders isn’t exclusive to organizations led by White figureheads but—owing to the pervasive power of Whiteness in its underpinning, resourcing, and defining of the culture of the industrial landscape—is also present even in organizations with Black women at the helm. In the case of Black Girls Code, CEO Kimberly Bryant, who founded the organization in 2011, was abruptly denied access to her email in December 2021 and later learned that she had been indefinitely suspended by her board of directors—after her company had been valued at \$30 million in philanthropic funding.⁸ Accused of creating a toxic work environment—no doubt a thinly veiled nod to the widely acceptable typecasting of the Angry Black Woman—Bryant (by her own account) was removed “without cause or an opportunity to participate in a vote...[and denied] severance, healthcare assistance, or a vacation payout,...which she is entitled to by law in California.”⁹ Similarly, in 2019, Kim R. Ford was announced as the new president and CEO of Martha’s Table, following her service to “President Obama’s Administration, where she helped lead the

**An Angry Black Woman must
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nobody’s coming to save her.**

implementation of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, distributing more than \$350 billion in recovery funds to spur economic growth.”¹⁰ A short three years later, Ford unexpectedly resigned, publishing the following statement:

Throughout my tenure, the board has been extremely abusive towards me.... They have publicly threatened and humiliated me on many occasions, manipulated the team, sabotaged the organization and spoken very negatively about the community. I was told that the behaviors would be addressed, people would be held accountable and things would get better. Instead, the behaviors got worse. I asked for help repeatedly. I was even uncharacteristically vulnerable in telling them several times about how much their treatment had harmed my mental, emotional and physical well-being, and I even gave specific examples of the impact—but that was ignored.¹¹

It is very easy to malign and mistreat an Angry Black Woman in a position of power—even if that categorization is based solely on imagined characterizations and conjectures that are reinforced through cultural media and the vagaries of modern public discourse. An Angry Black Woman must be put back in her place—stripped of her dreams and her dignity, and left on her own. She will drown, because nobody’s coming to save her.

A BLACK WOMAN LEADER DISAPPEARS

In *The Black Subaltern: An Intimate Witnessing*, I explain the theory of disappearance to signify how the Black female internal self can be absorbed into the system to which she is attempting to gain entrance—in this case, the workforce. If a Black woman leader decides to play the game of racial self-denial in order to ascend institutional structures, my theory holds that she will be unable to recover what she has hidden of herself and will, in fact, be lost.

In the nonprofit-industrial complex, this typically looks like Black female leaders adopting what Makeba Lavan refers to as a belief in “apolitical multiculturalism,” or the White ventriloquism of non-White people who refuse to attend to race.¹² In this way, Black women who disappear lead from a hollow place, parroting what they have observed to be the acceptable rationalizing language of the establishment over and against the interests of their people whenever necessary.

Many Black women in positions of leadership earnestly believe that they cannot afford the luxury of a more integral moral ecology because they are being made to choose between their livelihoods and their ideals. Many also feel that rather than an act of self-betrayal, it is an act of resigned fatalism—one that simply acknowledges that the fate of Black women will never change, and thus self-sacrifice is as meaningless as it is costly and therefore not worth the bargain. They have observed the many Black women champions who have carried generations of racial turmoil and harm on their backs only to be put out to pasture and labeled “indefensible,” and they have decided instead to survive an ugly system the only way they see possible: in hiding.

It would be a mistake to consider this choice to be tensionless; nevertheless, it is a form of surrender. There are yet other Black women leaders who reason that the pace of change, although slow, is sure, and rationalize their assimilation as strategically beneficial in the long run. Some sincerely believe that admittance to influential rooms is a signal that sometime in the illusive future they will earn acceptance and the power to pull others up as they climb.

Former First Lady Michelle Obama was widely criticized for her exclusively White-adjacent hairstyles while in the White House; but following her tenure, she explained that she believed “America wasn’t ready to accept her natural hair... [and] she didn’t want the focus to be on trivializing her hair but [rather] on the work that needed to be done for the American people.”¹³ Now free of the weight of the Oval Office, she has begun experimenting with wearing her hair as it naturally occurs. Only the former First Lady would be able to verify whether the choice to disguise herself in White-adjacent hair for eight years felt like hiding and whether her current shift in hairstyling is in fact an expression of her personal autonomy and not simply a new type of ventriloquism in search of self-recovery and approval. None of us can say. What we do know is that a Black woman in leadership who has refused



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to drown will invariably notice that all of the concessions she assents to amount to her disappearance.

FIXING THINGS FOR BLACK WOMEN LEADERS

The question remains: What would make leadership better for Black women? *Stop drowning us, and stop making us disappear.* The Angry Black Woman is a dangerous fiction, and once applied, we are no longer seen, heard, or attended to. Black women cannot stop its application, but someone should. When forced to choose between self and survival, even if only for the benefit of all of the people who depend on us, many of us will elect to survive. We cannot reorder the conditions of the labor-industrial complex, or, frankly, any other establishment, to make ourselves acceptable as we are—that is not *our* work. But if that work continues to be neglected, we will continue to lose our hair, our minds, our souls, our bodies, our voices, and our futures—and oh what a tragedy that would be.

After I had finished writing this article, Dr. Claudine Gay, the first Black woman president of Harvard University, also became the first Harvard president to serve a term of only six months and two days.¹⁴ In a guest essay published in the New York Times, Gay explained her departure, saying that she “fell into a well-laid trap.”¹⁵ Just days later, Dr. Antoinette Candia-Bailey, the vice president for student affairs at the historically Black Lincoln University, died by suicide,¹⁶ sparking widespread outrage and a range of conversations about the impossible task of enduring in a position of leadership within the academy. These deeply painful losses—of dreams and promise and life itself—both within the predominantly White community and the historically Black community, are telling us a valuable truth about what it costs to be a Black woman who leads. It is a truth we have been ignoring for a very long time, and a truth whose time has come.

NOTES

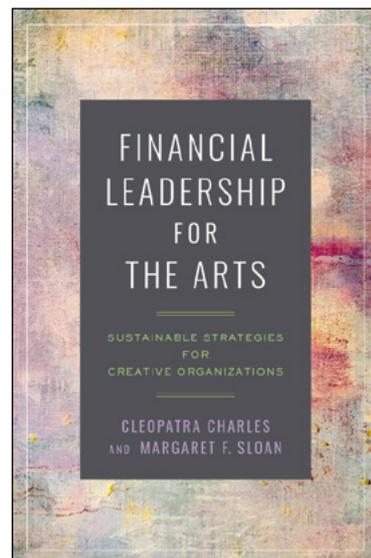
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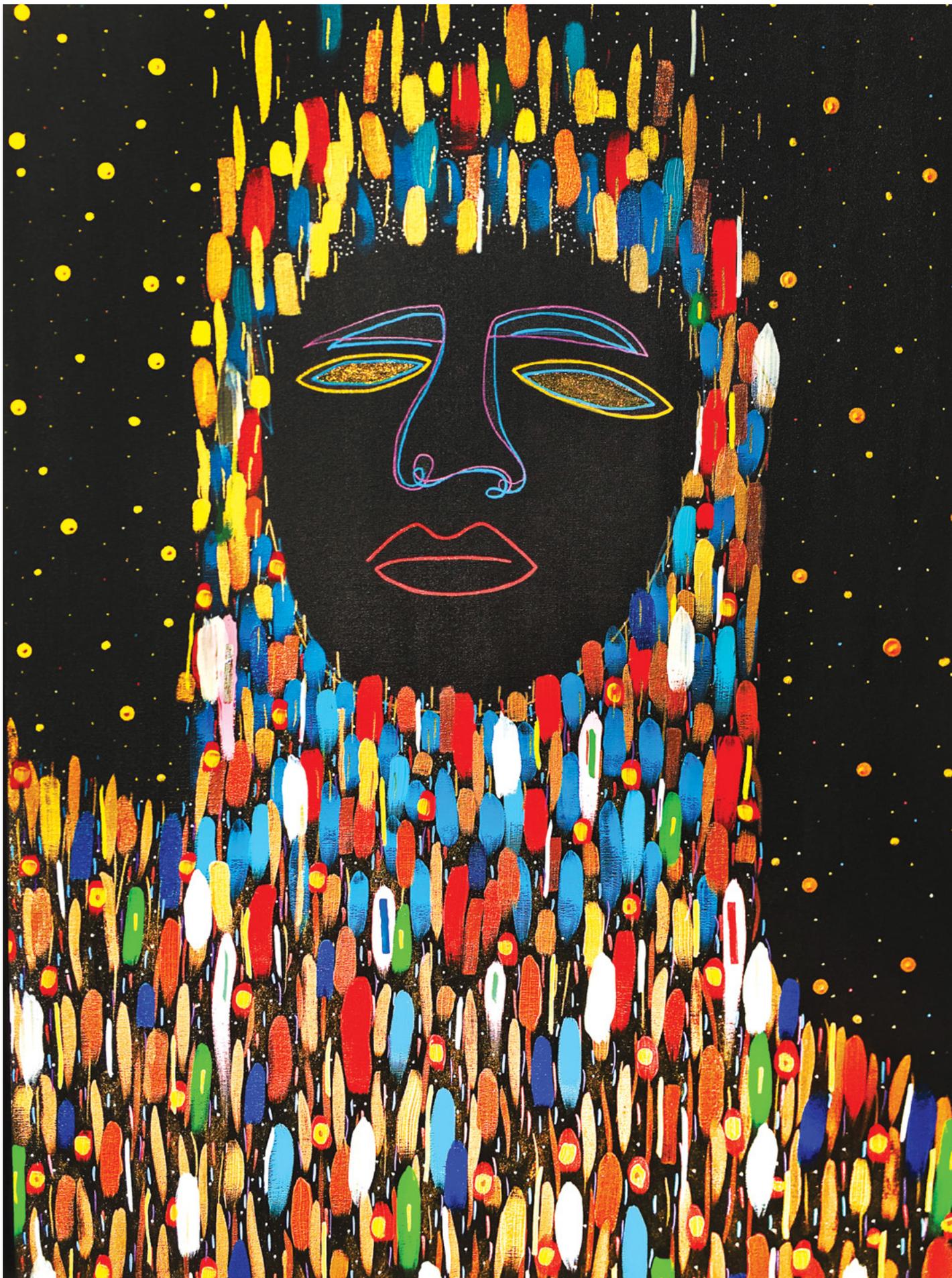
“We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible”: Navigating Three Black Women Tropes in Leadership

by Kerrien Suarez and Whitney Parnell

Many organizational executives who identify as Black and women are not sure how much longer they will be able to continue in their leadership roles. The physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual toll of doing the emotional labor expected of us—the labor that racism socializes others to expect us to do in the workplace and beyond—has been documented as shortening our lives.

*I think there are a lot of things that have been said to me—even by members of my own team—that would not have been said if I presented with another identity. People demand things of me, often disrespectfully, because there is an unconscious belief that Black women exist to care for and serve the needs of others. There is the trope of the **Mammy**, the beneficent, all-powerful mother who is supposed to take care of everybody’s emotional and physical needs. The flip side of that coin is the **Angry Black Woman**, who hurts everyone’s feelings. And then there’s the **Magical Superwoman**, who can do everything for everybody immediately, regardless of organizational constraints like timelines or budgets. Folks, including other Black people, have been socialized to believe that I owe them my labor as a human being. A colleague once pointed out that a stakeholder was engaging me as if I were their personal “race equity doula.” That observation rang painfully true, because it called out both the stakeholder’s inappropriate expectations and my conscious fulfillment of them.*

—Kerrien Suarez, 2022 interview with Whitney Parnell for the “What Does It Mean to Be Black-Led?” research project



B

lack women are tired. Sick and tired. The physical effects of racism over a lifetime, called “weathering,”¹ are illustrated by health disparities among Black women.² It’s killing us. And everyone is watching it happen.

We don’t mean *watching* as in viewing the horrifically commonplace video footage of a Black person being killed by police. We mean *sitting across from us in meetings and conference rooms observing “death by a thousand cuts.”*³

Many organizational executives who identify as Black and women are not sure how much longer they will be able to continue in their leadership roles. The physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual toll of doing the emotional labor expected of us—the labor that racism socializes others to expect us to do in the workplace⁴ and beyond—has been documented as shortening our lives,⁵ even as the Nap Ministry’s manifesto that “Rest Is Resistance” inspires us to set boundaries that can protect our minds and bodies from the daily impact of white supremacy in society and organizations.⁶

How do the tropes associated with Black women show up in the workplace, and what impacts do they have? How can our allies and coconspirators within organizations—including others who identify as Black and of color—be in solidarity with Black women by interrupting patterns and challenging expectations rooted in these tropes? Below, we highlight three that predominate in the workplace.

THE ANGRY BLACK WOMAN TROPE

The *Angry Black Woman* trope seems to surround Black women like an invisible cloak as we try to exist in the world as our full selves. Most aspects of our basic ways of being are up for potential scrutiny and accusations of aggression,

Black women leaders have overwhelmingly expressed a shared experience of being labeled as angry and aggressive by our staffs and boards when giving instructions or making decisions.

including our expressions, our tones, and even our sheer presence or input.

Notably, while the external barriers that we face with this Angry Black Woman trope are harmful, receiving the same label from our own teams can be the most disheartening and detrimental. Black women leaders have overwhelmingly expressed a shared experience of being labeled as angry and aggressive by our staffs and boards when giving instructions or making decisions. Demonstrating such authority seems contrary to our systemic place in society at the bottom, and is, hence, implicitly rejected in practice. The explicit response is that our actions and posture are problematic and offensive as leaders, when the implicit indication really seems to be the fact that we are their leaders at all.

The Angry Black Woman trope is possibly most glaring when we give feedback. Any sort of feedback that we offer team members relative to performance, accountability, and, especially, the unique problematic behavior that they are demonstrating toward us, is often responded to with defensiveness and/or turned back on us as if we are the problem. To take this further, in more recent years we have witnessed a weaponization of equity, whereby people claim that our decision-making and feedback go against our organization’s equity and liberation values. We get told that we are not allowing employee agency because we are not listening, even when we have considered all the factors and suggestions involved before coming to a decision. We get told that we are not supporting our people-first values when we give feedback, because it is a supposed attack—when communicating thorough and timely feedback is actually a critical component of equity.

The Angry Black Woman trope prevents us from being able to lead authentically because it either inhibits us from showing up fully—given the likely reactions—or we constantly come up against strong defensiveness, attack, and refusal when we assert our leadership. It is abundantly clear that while any Black woman can be subjected to this trope throughout her life, for Black women leaders that label is leveraged as a tactic to altogether reject our leadership.

It is exhausting to be held to a standard that expects us to lead organizations that demand our constant outpouring and criticizes us when irrational and inappropriate demands are not met.

THE MAMMY TROPE

The *Mammy* trope may be the most nuanced and subtle trope that Black women leaders face, due to the unique ability many of us possess to implement care through our leadership, and the implicit, irrational expectations of our teams that they will receive an overabundance of caretaking. The combination of these two dynamics leads to entitlement from staff and board members, and exhausted Black women leaders.

This ability to genuinely center care and wellbeing at the institutions we run is a special attribute we offer as leaders. While no Black woman is a monolith (and plenty of Black women succumb to the dehumanization of labor that has been systematized in society), we have historically been able to exude profound amounts of care. Part of that disposition may be a unique gifting; other parts can be attributed to *standpoint theory*,⁷ whereby our experiences of disregard and harm at the intersection of racism and sexism make us uniquely dispositioned to consider, recognize, and offer care to everyone. However, it cannot be denied that a critical factor is cultural. And while culture has its beautiful qualities that build off the unique strengths and characteristics of its community and people, it can also inadvertently create a standard of expectation and exploitation. We see this in the Mammy trope; since society has only ever known Black women to be exceptional caretakers, that posture is often systemically expected of us. And within institutions led by Black women, that expectation often presents itself in the form of entitlement. Entitlement by way of the Mammy trope is particularly glaring when it comes to demands. Many Black women have shared with us experiences of staff members having unreasonable expectations of the organization revolving around their desires, even if it would come at the expense of the work and the rest of their team.

We discussed a similar trend vis-à-vis the Angry Black Woman trope that comes up when we offer feedback regarding accountability and performance that doesn't accord with what a team member wants to hear, and we get told that we are not demonstrating our equity and people-first values. However, *accountability* and *care* are not mutually exclusive. One can be cared for and still be held accountable for quality work. Furthermore, as from an equity lens, "people first" only works if it is trust based. Everyone must be trustworthy with respect to meeting their responsibilities, so that the organization functions well as a whole.

It is exhausting to be held to a standard that expects us to lead organizations that demand our constant outpouring and criticizes us when irrational and inappropriate demands are not met. On top of that, it is disheartening to know that while infinite care, support, and mothering are (unreasonably) expected of Black women, there is no sense of reciprocation. The same people on our teams who expect us to give wholeheartedly are not only often oblivious to the unconscious nature of their disproportionately high demands of Black women but also neglect to consider how they might offer some of that care back. Ironically, many of the Black women we speak with do not express a desire to receive reciprocal care; we understand that it is a unique gift that we choose to offer. Instead, many of us are just asking for consideration: we ask people to consider our wellbeing when it comes to their actions (and inactions); to consider our capacity and efforts when it comes to their demands and expectations; and to consider that we are human beings doing our best and who are deserving of grace.

THE MAGICAL SUPERWOMAN TROPE

The *Magical Superwoman* trope ties back to broader cultural and historical implications whereby Black women are expected to do and carry disproportionately more than anyone else. In her book *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto*, Tricia Hersey asserts that Black women have systemically been viewed and treated as society's "mule."⁸ This has certainly been verified by Black women in all positions of work,⁹ and it is particularly telling that the same applies in even the highest positions of leadership.

Consistently absorbing the labor and covering the gaps is problematic from multiple angles. On the one hand, it is often blatantly obvious that Black women leaders are stretching ourselves incredibly thin; and it is disheartening to know that people recognize this but are not moved to make the necessary changes that would alleviate our loads. That said, many Black women have noted that a major challenge regarding this Magical Superwoman trope is that often our teams do

We seek to have room for error, growth, and balance. However, when we ask for help, there's little support, due to the Mammy trope. When we give instruction for alleviation, we are the Angry Black Woman. There is no relief at the top of the glass cliff.

not realize just how much we are carrying. Oftentimes, Black women leaders are dragging the work to the finish line while also thinking several steps ahead, and trying to get their own work done while also ensuring that everybody else is meeting what is expected of them. Black women are trying to deliver at a high level while also covering the gaps and fixing the errors of others. Black women are trying to drive the work forward while also trying to repair past and current harms and challenges. Black women are literally expected to do it all—symbolically steering the ship, rowing the ship, fueling the ship, being the current in the water moving the ship along, and serving as the safety net in case anything falls.

All of this is a load that no human being should reasonably be expected to consistently carry, which is why we are forced to be Magical Superwomen. We are expected to be exceptional at worst and magical at best. And as much as we may be told that we are not expected to be perfect, there is no “failing up”¹⁰ for us, because we do not receive grace as Black women leaders. We often only receive one chance to come into an organization and magically save it in a “glass cliff” situation,¹¹ or we are expected to fail as affirmation that we should never have been in charge. Furthermore, given all that we carry, there is minimal room for error, because if we slip, so much would fall apart—and the blame (and repercussions) will be on us. That is not just in our heads, and one need not look far to find real-life examples.

To be clear, many of us desire a different way. We seek to have room for error, growth, and balance. However, when we ask for help, there's little support, due to the Mammy trope. When we give instruction for alleviation, we are the Angry Black Woman. There is no relief at the top of the glass cliff.



These three tropes spotlight the internal barriers and challenges that Black women face, and external factors contribute to and enhance these challenges. Black-led organizations

receive less funding than their white counterparts, and Black-women-led organizations receive the least of all. We are often operating significantly below our budgetary needs. This affects our abilities to implement all of the desired equitable policies and requires our organizations to deliver with significant capacity constraints. Hence, Black women will often absorb labor to alleviate the rest of the team's load. In addition, there seems to be an expectation that we will cover all the gaps, as opposed to the team collectively sharing the load when needed. Black women know that often, when things need to get done, if nobody else does the work it will fall on us.

The tropes inform and impact each other, and they create very challenging and isolating experiences for Black women. Clarity around these tropes can certainly provide Black women with relief and alleviation of stress by helping us to understand that we are not to blame for these hardships. And we can also empower ourselves to draw boundaries around what we will and will not do, and establish agency around how we will lead (regardless of the reactions). That is why sisterhood and support among each other as Black women leaders is so critical to our success. There is power in being able to validate and unpack shared experience together and pour into each other deeply amid a world that extracts from us. (Our own friendship—and our practice as accountability partners continuously learning to actively center equity in our daily work—is a testament to that; it enabled us to write this article together.) But Black women are often instructed to empower ourselves to seek and make changes that will alleviate our hardships, which ultimately puts all of the work on us to dismantle these systems that constitutionally work against us. While identity may impact people's individual dispositions vis-à-vis these tropes, no one is or can be exempt from participating in these systemic challenges in our organizations.

The external experience is hard enough—leading as our organizations' main faces and voices; the internal experience—understanding that teamwork isn't easy—should be a place of refuge and recovery from the harm, barriers, and fatigue that Black women face every day as leaders and people. That is why, in addition to external sisterhood, internal allyship is critical to Black women leaders' success. Having allies within the organization who hold identities of privilege relative to ours can help drive protection against these tropes and can also provide the support that we are often denied. (We can both speak to the incredible impact of

having allies in deputy positions—those who identify as Black men and as non-Black people of color—who set examples for what mutual accountability, partnership, and teamwork can look like.) Another way is possible, and the sooner that we can actualize that way, the sooner Black women can be relieved from specializing in the wholly impossible.

“We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible” is the motto of the National Training School for Women and Girls,¹² a school for Black women founded by Nannie Helen Burroughs in Washington, DC, in 1909.

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Your Comfort Is Killing Me:

The Toll of Unseen— and Unpaid—Emotional Labor

by *M. Gabriela Alcalde*

■

The endemic nature of harmful experiences in unsupportive and toxic workplaces creates a collective emotional drain among women of color leaders in the United States. Women of color leaders are being depleted while navigating harm at the interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels, distracting and derailing energy, creativity, and attention from the intended work of creating a more just world for all.

■

The following has been excerpted from the author's manuscript Your Comfort Is Killing Me: How to Fix Workplace Culture and Support the Transformative Leadership of Women of Color. The manuscript centers the experiences of women of color leaders, including the author's firsthand experiences as a minoritized leader in the predominantly White worlds of nonprofits and philanthropy. What follows speaks to the personal and professional toll of emotional labor for women of color—particularly Black women—leaders. Names and identifying information have been changed to mitigate risk to those who share their stories here. All interviews were conducted virtually during June and July 2022; survey responses were received through an online form between January and March 2023.¹

W

orkplace harm can result from a lack of psychological safety at work² and includes behaviors such as discrimination,³ harassment,⁴ bullying,⁵ microaggressions,⁶ double standards,⁷ unreasonable workloads,⁸ and racial gaslighting.⁹ When such harms are layered upon the societal racism and sexism that women of color (and particularly Black women, due to deep anti-Blackness and colorism in the United States) endure, the damage caused is multilayered, intersectional, and cumulative—and it is killing us.



“Celebrating us publicly and annihilating us internally and privately” said Kiara, a Black philanthropic leader, describing how the workplace treats women of color.

Women of color experience a higher degree of microaggressions, lack of support, and gaslighting in the workplace than their White peers.¹⁰ They are also paid less than their White or male peers;¹¹ even with higher levels of education, Black, Native, and Latine women earn less than their male and White counterparts.¹² And women of color are less likely to become organizational leaders than White women or men, despite having higher levels of self-reported ambition for leadership.¹³ Because US society is built from the blueprints of White supremacy, patriarchy, and racial capitalism, the growing demographic diversity in the United States alone is not enough to change these realities or create cultural and psychological safety in our workplaces for racialized and minoritized populations. Increasing diversity without inclusion, belonging, and safety, as I learned during my 2023 research on women of color leaders, is causing women of color actual, progressive harm.

COLLECTIVE EMOTIONAL DRAIN

In the interviews I conducted and the responses to my surveys, emotional labor was uniformly identified as a consequence of having to navigate the intersection of racialized and gendered workplace barriers. Emotional labor has also been a significant burden (and energy drain) in my personal work experience. As survey participants aptly noted, working within a culture that doesn't account for or create space for one's reality, experiences, and identity is *exhausting*. “Invisible when accomplishing work with excellence, visible when being gaslighted,” is how Cora, a Black nonprofit leader, described it.¹⁴ It is “having to explain my experiences and real life over and over in White spaces; feeling isolated and alone; [a] lack of mentors who share my experience,” described Maya, a multiracial nonprofit and philanthropic leader.¹⁵

The endemic nature of harmful experiences in unsupportive and toxic workplaces creates a collective emotional drain among women of color leaders in the United States. Women of color leaders are being depleted while navigating harm at the interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels, distracting and derailing energy, creativity, and attention from the

intended work of creating a more just world for all. “Celebrating us publicly and annihilating us internally and privately,” said Kiara, a Black philanthropic leader, describing how the workplace treats women of color.¹⁶

Women of color shared stories about having to remain calm through repeated covert and overt insults, offensive remarks, and microaggressions. They described enduring stereotypes and racialized and gendered tropes, shared stories about White women's weaponized tears and passive-aggressiveness, and recounted feeling both invisible and hypervisible. Many also shared stories about doing racial equity work even when it isn't part of their job, and of the unspoken expectation that women of color also be the emotional laborers and caregivers for their organizations.

When asked about emotional drains women of color face at work, the women I surveyed recounted experiencing:

- Lack of respect and support
- Exclusion from opportunities
- White coworkers being paid significantly/disproportionately more than them
- Constant scrutiny and second-guessing
- Being undervalued and underestimated
- Tokenism and fetishization (“pet to threat”)¹⁷
- Expectation to represent all women of color or one's specific community/ies
- Lack of understanding of intersectional identities at work
- Pressure to be “flawless,” better than others, and to overproduce
- Stereotyping—being told they are intimidating, scary, angry, loud, unprofessional
- Having to constantly code-switch
- Gaslighting
- Lack of mentorship

Some of the ways in which these drains show up in the workplace for the women I interviewed and surveyed, follow.

Lack of mentorship

Research indicates that those who experience mentorship “perform better, advance in their careers faster, and even experience more workplace satisfaction,”¹⁸ and most of the women I interviewed and surveyed experienced a lack of

mentorship opportunities as a significant workplace barrier. While a few women mentioned mentors who were White and/or male, having mentors who have faced similar challenges and barriers as women of color was identified by all interviewees as essential. As Diya, a South Asian American educational leader, described it,

The organizations where I've worked just didn't know how to mentor me, and they just didn't even try. I find it hard to hear them say that they are committed to diversity and inclusion when they aren't willing to work with a woman of color to find a way to provide mentorship that works for [her] and addresses [her] reality. Because what they have been doing has kept the systems in place.¹⁹

Kiara shared that having a Black woman as a mentor early on in her career had given her confidence, guidance, and support in ways that resonated with her life experiences. She had access to learning and work opportunities that she wouldn't have had without this mentor, and acknowledged that, sadly, "this is not the reality for most Black women or other women of color."²⁰

The women I interviewed and surveyed described supporting other women of color as critical to being a leader. Still, this commitment to solidarity with other women of color brings additional responsibility and effort that White men and women don't face, given the availability of White leaders to serve as mentors and mentorship programs geared toward Whiteness and White leadership models. As Breanne, a Black nonprofit leader, said, "[An] added labor we carry [is] to mentor younger women of color and/or support our POC colleagues. Basically, [reaching] back down and [pulling] other women of color up."²¹

Expectation to represent, or "rep sweats"

Closely related to the responsibility to support other women of color amid a shortage of mentorship opportunities is the pressure many women of color feel to *represent*. One survey respondent referenced *rep sweats*, a term stand-up comic Jenny Yang developed to describe how people of color often feel like they have to represent their entire race/s or community/ies, and the pressure that puts on an individual.²² Women of color organizational leaders are aware that they inhabit a rarified space for Black, Indigenous, and other women of color, and carry this awareness as one more responsibility that they don't see their White peers worrying about. They talked about the anxiety they feel about making

"The organizations where I've worked just didn't know how to mentor me, and they just didn't even try."

—Diya

any mistakes and about the repercussions of those mistakes for others of their perceived identity.

Exclusion from opportunities, and being undervalued and disrespected

White, patriarchal-dominant cultural frameworks are so deeply built into the bones of the practices, policies, and structures of our work institutions that there is often no place to challenge an unjust process or decision. This lack of accountability, combined with women of color's perception that they are perpetually underestimated, disrespected, and viewed through a White leadership lens, leads to qualified women of color leaders being excluded from and denied professional opportunities. Experiences such as the following, shared by Krista, a highly educated Black woman (who was working on a doctoral degree at the time of our interview, and has decades of leadership experience in the nonprofit and grassroots sectors), were painfully common among the women I interviewed and surveyed:

I applied for this new position at the place where I'd been working and was told I didn't have enough leadership experience for the new position. Soon after, another Black woman I knew applied for the job and was also turned down. The next thing I knew, a White woman I was supervising applied, and she got the job, even though the White woman had no supervisory experience, less work experience and education than I, and had been part of the interviewing team—part of the process that interviewed the other Black woman who applied and me! So now the entire leadership team was White women.²³

Krista left the organization shortly after, realizing that there was no transparency or accountability for the all-White leadership team and their decisions.

Stereotypes, tropes, and the emotional tax that results

Workplace emotional tax is defined as the adverse effects resulting from "feeling different from peers at work because of gender, race, and/or ethnicity."²⁴ In a country with persistent, predictable, and growing racial disparities and violently enforced anti-Blackness, the burden of a workplace

“To be told you’re scary, you’re intimidating, you make people feel bad by your sheer existence—what does that do to your ability to exert your power, to be a leader? It makes me question myself: Is it me? Am I this person they’re describing?”

—Angela

emotional tax is felt acutely by women of color leaders, and especially by Black women leaders. As Danielle, a Black nonprofit leader, said during our interview, when describing her internal dialogue around how she is perceived when she exercises her embodied power as a leader,

All of that is evaluated through implicit bias, through the tropes and the stereotypes of strong Black women, Black women who climbed the ladders...the angry Black woman trope.... We still navigate our insecurities; we question how Black can we be in that space, right? The hair issues, the tone of our voices, and how loud we can be.²⁵

Women of color, and Black women in particular, are most likely to experience (and anticipate) gender and racial bias at work.²⁶ A lifetime of navigating structural barriers and threats and accruing emotional labor at work can have uniquely potent effects, including on the health and wellbeing of women of color. The compelling research on “weathering,”²⁷ which finds that repeated exposure to racism and other adverse social conditions causes premature aging and related health risks, speaks to the profound toll interpersonal and structural racism takes on Black women and women of color at the cellular level and on populations as a whole. All interviewees mentioned the impact that workplace stress and dysfunction had on their health, with multiple instances of women leaving specific workplaces because of their harmful (physical and behavioral) health impact.

Code-switching, making ourselves smaller, and other forms of contorting our full selves

And as you’re being forced to be made small, you start internalizing that, and you forget all of the things you’ve done in the past.²⁸

—Shanti, Asian American nonprofit leader

Code-switching, constantly translating across cultures and worldviews, and filtering ourselves for our safety and for the comfort of others is tiring; yet these are common and often necessary experiences for women of color leaders. For many women of color, the issues we work on are not just professional or abstract—they are personal and high stakes. As Krista said, “We’re close to the issues, and we’re close to the suffering; we’re close to the pain.”²⁹ Our intimacy with the issues we work on brings a different energy to the work. Women I interviewed and surveyed reported being just as likely to be complimented for being passionate about their lived experiences as admonished for being too intense, too fierce, too confident, and intimidating.

Many of the women I interviewed and surveyed mentioned having to restrain themselves and filter what they bring to the workplace. As Angela, a Black nonprofit leader, said,

To be told you’re scary, you’re intimidating, you make people feel bad by your sheer existence—what does that do to your ability to exert your power, to be a leader? It makes me question myself: Is it me? Am I this person they’re describing? And then I do this emotional and mental exploration.³⁰

I have been called intimidating, scary, and too confident more times than I care to recall, and just like Angela, these comments triggered self-doubt and activated a deeply conditioned aversion to being perceived as angry or aggressive—and, therefore, unprofessional.

Krista shared feeling that she is never viewed as talking, walking, or behaving in the way that workplaces consider appropriate for a leader. She explained,

Typically, our goals [as women of color] differ. How we show up is different, how we respond is different, our level of passion is different, and what’s at stake for us is different. What I’ve experienced is that when it’s a Black woman who’s being uncompromising, she’s being a bitch, she’s being angry, she’s not being like whatever she is supposed to be. No! We don’t have time to compromise! We’re dying. There’s a different level of urgency and reality [for women of color].³¹

Making oneself small was a common theme across all interviews. Women of color, and particularly Black women, spoke of the fear of being seen as “too much” and the risk they perceived in bringing their full selves to work. Relatedly, women shared endless experiences with tone policing,

especially by White leaders and board members. All the women I interviewed spoke with a deep sense of frustration about the effort they regularly expend in making themselves palatable for White-dominant-culture workplaces. The world is on fire, yet women of color are habitually expected to comport ourselves as if we did not live in a violently unjust world.

Pressure to overproduce and overperform

But for me, raised as a Black woman, I must be twice as good and work twice as hard as everybody else.³²

—Danielle, Black nonprofit leader

The heavy burden of emotional labor that Black women and other women of color leaders endure in the workplace is exacerbated by the disproportionate levels of responsibility for leading equity, inclusion, and diversity efforts at work, even when it's not part of their job. Yet even in the context of this added emotional labor, women of color find ways to adapt and intensify their resolve. In the words of Lucia, a Latine educational leader, women of color's lived experiences navigating visible and invisible barriers equip them to "question everything—from policies to programming to structures—and keep what is useful to more than simply a minority of people with power, and move forward with what potentially could be more nurturing to everyone, including those who haven't had leadership positions."³³ This is at the root of the transformational power of women of color's leadership: we live what is invisible and theoretical to most organizational leaders in the United States, having had to learn to navigate multiple realities at once. This equips women of color leaders with specific skills and assets, described by Darren Isom, Cora Daniels, and Britt Savage as more community-centered motivations, the ability to work across identities and networks, and being particularly adept at change management—which involves possessing "self-awareness," seeing the world with "double consciousness" and from the perspective of "intersectional identities," being "comfortable [with] being uncomfortable," having "a high degree of empathy," "observation and active listening," "collaborative leadership," "asset-based approach[es]," and "radical imagination."³⁴

Gaslighting

Gaslighting at work was, sadly, a widespread experience for the women I interviewed and surveyed. Most of the women I spoke with reflected on the fact that they have experienced harm from individuals who present and perhaps even view

"What I've experienced is that when it's a Black woman who's being uncompromising, she's being a bitch, she's being angry, she's not being like whatever she is supposed to be. No! We don't have time to compromise! We're dying."

—Krista

themselves as "definitely not racist." Threats to the comfort of the powerful can elicit abusive behavior from individuals one might never suspect of engaging in gaslighting, disinformation, or other harm. People who are used to wielding power (whether they are aware of this or not) feel entitled to comfort, to being the center of attention, to being in the presumed gaze as a desired object, and to having their perspectives and skills valued and recognized. As Laura, a Black philanthropic leader, noted,

I have been hurt and faced [substantial] racism/sexism from people who believe they are antiracist. They are so good at seeing racism when it happens at a distance (time, geography, scale), but they are resistant to seeing it close up or believing that "good" people are racist/sexist. It is like being in an abusive relationship—"antiracist," "woke" White men and women will rave about how fabulous you are, the importance of BIPOC communities, the beauty, strength, blah blah blah (insert gushing comment about Dr. King here); they will put you up on a pedestal as a remarkable person and then pull you down hard with microaggressions, denying of isms, and blatant prejudice and discrimination.³⁵



Emotional labor is a significant, pervasive, and complex reality shared by every woman I interviewed and surveyed, while also being a dimension of every other theme identified through the interviews and surveys I conducted. Through the stories shared with me and my own experiences, I understand the emotional toll to be the result of having to navigate intentional and unintentional harm every day in psychologically unsafe workplaces. It is important to understand that unintentional harm also creates emotional labor; many instances were shared in which people considered allies

I invite all to learn from the transformational leadership of Black women and other women of color, to sit with the constructive discomfort that deep empathy can enable, and to work collectively to transform our workplace cultures.

created harmful conditions. As Monica, a multiracial grassroots leader, described it,

What was so hard about it was that people who loved me and said they respected me replicated the status quo of oppression by encouraging me to conform.³⁶

As someone with extensive public health training, I am trained to look for the roots of injury and disease and seek ways to prevent further harm—or at least mitigate harm in some way—for myself and others. I invite all to learn from the transformational leadership of Black women and other

women of color, to sit with the constructive discomfort that deep empathy can enable, and to work collectively to transform our workplace cultures.

To heal from the harm, we must first be willing and able to see the harm, empathize with the pain, sit with the discomfort, and not succumb to the very American tendency to jump straight to quick-fix solutions. Because as bell hooks says, “True resistance begins with people confronting pain...and wanting to do something to change it.”³⁷

NOTES

1. The manuscript from which this article was adapted draws on 10 interviews and over 30 surveys of women of color leaders. It foregrounds their stories to disrupt the entrenched White supremacist and patriarchal workplace structures and cultures that dominate the sector, addresses the need for constructive discomfort and systemic change, and relates stories about: power; identity; the difference between comfort and safety; the need to take up space; self-determination; fear; our relationship with uncertainty; and the necessary messiness at the heart of change. Emotional labor is among the most common threads across these stories.
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Beyond Karen: White Woman Archetypes in the Third Sector

by Yanique Redwood

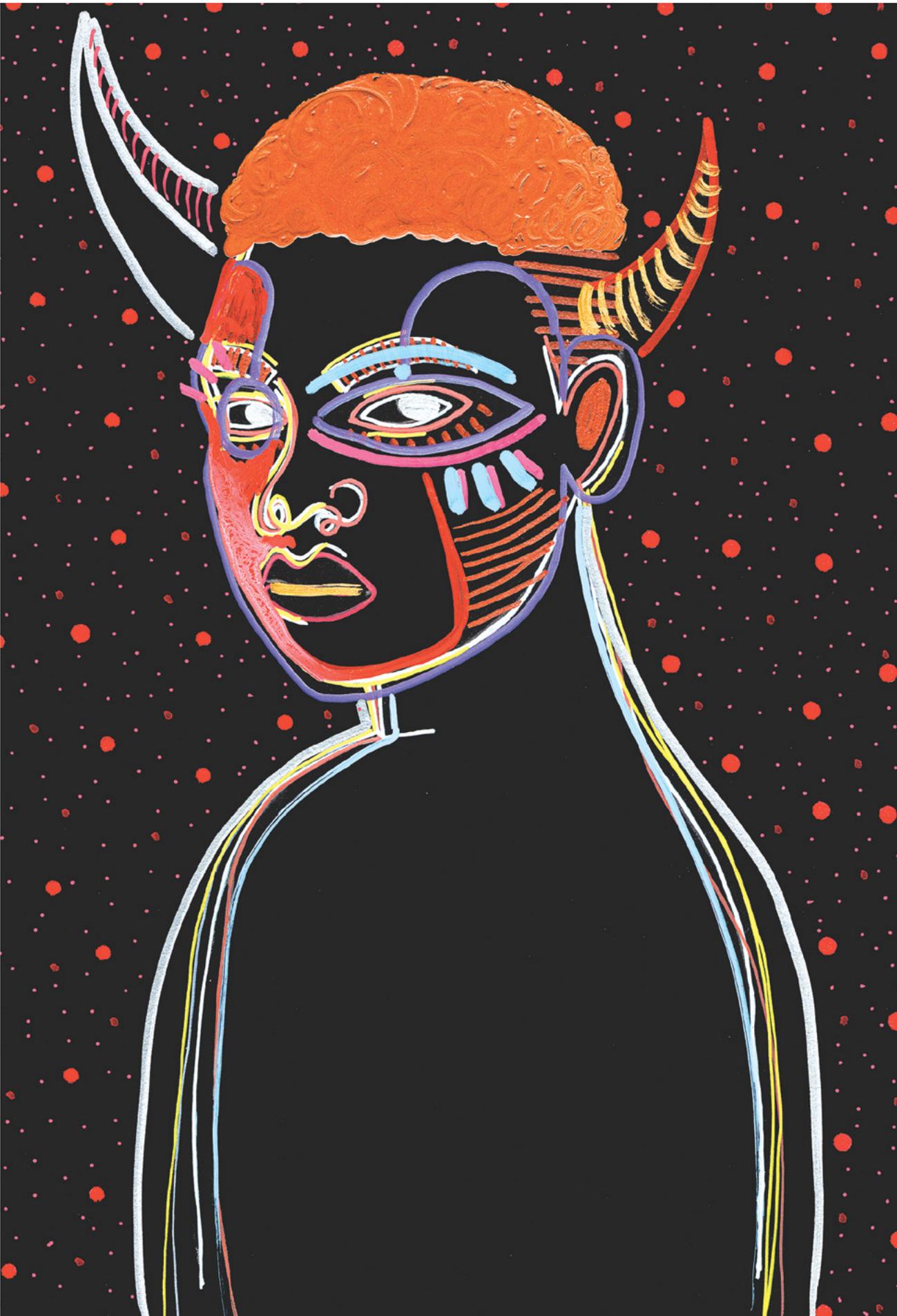

 The primary goal of this article is to provide Black women with language and insight into additional White woman archetypes...so they can begin the important healing work of naming racial aggression and releasing the shame and embarrassment that often accompany our experiences of racism in the workplace.

The question remains in my mind: How do so many Black women who have never met, don't live in the same neighborhood, don't work in the same industry, and have different life backgrounds, all have similar stories that speak to the same dynamic? It cannot be a coincidence.

—Alicia S.¹


 lack women can't catch a break in America,² and that includes our experience in the American workplace. A recent study, published by the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, of entry-level US-based employees at a large, global professional-services firm found that White employees—and in particular, White women³—had the highest retention and promotion rates, while Black employees had the lowest retention and promotion rates, relative to their White, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx colleagues.⁴ The largest relative turnover and promotion gap was between White women and Black women. In addition, Black women were the only workers whose turnover and promotion outcomes were impacted by the number of White coworkers they had on their teams.⁵

At around the same time that study was released, the Washington Area Women's Foundation published a study of 36 Black women leaders' experiences in the Washington, DC, area nonprofit sector.⁶ "Nearly 70% of respondents [in this study] agreed or strongly agreed that Black women's leadership has been notably under attack in recent years,...[and] over 90% of respondents expressed that their occupations have had detrimental effects on their health and well-being, manifesting as chronic stress, fatigue, elevated blood pressure, and impacts on mental health."⁷ One study respondent said, "[Black women] are not doing well."⁸



The Karen archetype of recent years—an irate White woman who calls the authorities on a Black person for just existing and minding their own business...has clarified the harm that is happening to Black people and who the perpetrator is.

In this article, I explore a dynamic that may be responsible, in part, for Black women's experiences in the workplace: *White woman fragility*—a term based in the work of author and professor Dr. Robin DiAngelo, whose book *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* brought the phenomenon of White fragility into mainstream consciousness.⁹ In my book, *White Women Cry and Call Me Angry: A Black Woman's Memoir on Racism in Philanthropy*, I describe debilitating interactions with White women in the philanthropic sector during my tenure as president and CEO of a private foundation in Washington, DC.¹⁰ As I engaged Black women readers around the themes in my book, I discovered that they, too, had experienced strikingly similar interactions, which led me to an exploration of archetypes.

An archetype is defined by *Collins Dictionary* as “a perfect or typical example of a particular kind of person or thing, because it has all their most important characteristics.”¹¹ In our society, archetypes are often rooted in harmful stereotypes. This is not the intention of this exploration. My intention here is to point to consistent White woman behaviors that have caused Black women harm. The Karen archetype of recent years—an irate White woman who calls the authorities on a Black person for just existing and minding their own business—which has been codified in Internet memes, has clarified the harm that is happening to Black people and who the perpetrator is. Dr. Apryl Williams, an assistant professor in communications and media at the University of Michigan, said in a *TIME* article, “These memes are actually doing logical and political work...[and] highlighting and sort of commenting on the racial inequality in a way that mainstream news doesn't capture.”¹²

The primary goal of this article is to provide Black women with language and insight into additional White woman

archetypes—especially in the third sector (philanthropy and nonprofits), where White women are dominant actors—so they can begin the important healing work of naming racial aggression and releasing the shame and embarrassment that often accompany our experiences of racism in the workplace. The secondary goal is to persuade foundation leaders in philanthropy to take urgent action to protect Black women who are doing important labor in the third sector with and on behalf of the most marginalized communities of color.¹³

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ARCHETYPES

Carl Jung is considered the father of archetypal psychology.¹⁴ He posited that there are universal patterns expressed in images and present in the collective unconscious of all humans across all cultures.¹⁵ These images are referred to as *archetypes*. Examples of archetypes include “the mother” (someone who is nurturing, loving, and protective),¹⁶ “the trickster” (someone who cheats or tests boundaries),¹⁷ and “the hero” (someone, usually depicted as male, who overcomes obstacles to reach a goal).¹⁸ These are not just personal characteristics; archetypes are thought to be deep, abiding, and powerful. According to Jung, they “create myths, religions, and philosophies that influence and characterize whole nations and epochs of history.”¹⁹

While Jung argued that archetypes are innate, others argue that archetypes are not fixed—for example, that they “operate in a contested space where actors exploit elements of religious discourse...to provide meaning and moral and political authority to support their vested interests.”²⁰ And according to Karl Marx, those with power, the elites in a society, are the ones who produce, distribute, and regulate the most powerful ideas of their age.²¹ This explains why we are, right now, in a heated battle over the origin story of the United States. I would argue that one of the reasons why American elites are actively suppressing books like *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*²² is because these books challenge the hero archetype, which has legitimized the struggle of White men who fled religious oppression, “discovered” land, and instituted the “necessary evil” of slavery to build the United States,²³ arguably the most powerful nation in the world.

Three archetypes in particular have been used to marginalize Black women in service of the same powerful White elite agenda rooted in slavery and persisting in American workplaces. The *Mammy* archetype is the image of an unattractive

Black women navigate White women daily to keep themselves and their livelihoods safe—sometimes successfully and sometimes not. We talk about White women’s behaviors in hushed tones over brunch, but we don’t talk about them out loud for many reasons, mainly because it is simply too dangerous to do so.

Black mother who is strong and content in her caregiving role for many children in the service of White slave owners or White employers.²⁴ To justify slavery, White slave owners invented and propagated this archetype to suggest that Black women were happy with slavery and suitable for domestic responsibilities. The *Sapphire* archetype is the image of an aggressive, dominating, angry, emasculating Black woman.²⁵ This archetype, too, serves a purpose—it suggests that Black women are ill-tempered and need to be shaped and managed. Finally, the *Jezebel* archetype is the image of an immoral, sexually promiscuous, sexually available Black woman,²⁶ used during slavery as a rationale for enslavers to sexually exploit Black women. Black women were painted as seductresses to excuse rape, a tool used by White enslavers for both domination and the birthing of new slaves.

These archetypes have destructive consequences even today. They frame ideas about the kinds of work for which Black women are suitable; they silence our demands for better treatment and justice for our communities; and they limit our ability to earn at the same levels as our counterparts. It is no wonder that when a Black woman lands a leadership role, the attacks begin almost immediately. I have been in confidential conversations with Black women since the forced resignation of Dr. Claudine Gay. Their stories are astounding, from being told “You are a token Black” (that is, you do not belong here) to “She wears whore boots”²⁷ (that is, her presence is offensive and inappropriate, and she does not belong here). In all of these circumstances, these Black women were fired or forced to resign and stripped of income and their career trajectory.

WHITE WOMAN ARCHETYPES

In *White Women Cry and Call Me Angry*, I discuss everyday interactions with White women in the philanthropic sector in Washington, DC.²⁸ Black women navigate White women daily to keep themselves and their livelihoods safe—sometimes successfully and sometimes not. We talk about White women’s behaviors in hushed tones over brunch, but we don’t talk about them out loud for many reasons, mainly because it is simply too dangerous to do so. Unless racism manifests in the most salacious ways, we generally don’t call it out. I almost didn’t. I worried about politeness. I believed the “micro” in microaggressions meant “not a big deal.” I feared backlash: who would hire me after speaking up about what happened to me? I often told myself at the time of the interactions that the communities I care about are struggling

with “real” problems, and I should be grateful for the privilege of a good job. I believed I had the wherewithal to persevere. But that striving came at a cost.

Below, I outline six potential White woman archetypes in response to Black women’s resounding resonance with the stories in my essay collection. In the space of a week or even a day, Black women in the workplace may experience anywhere between one and all of these archetypes, and the racism-related stress living in the body because of these interactions has devastating consequences. But first, I want to acknowledge the needle that I am threading by using negative archotyping to describe White woman behaviors. I do not believe this exploration of White woman archetypes will lead to negative repercussions for White women collectively, given that they are a dominant group with significant and consequential power in the third sector. I am balancing this very unlikely potential with the possible relief that Black women may experience as they better understand what is happening to them at work. The risk of the former feels worth it if these White woman archetypes can reveal truths and provide Black women with a kind of White woman literacy—that is, language to explain why we feel so exhausted and used up after interacting day after day, week after week, year after year with White women in the workplace.

Kristy is a progressive White woman. She wears her causes on her sleeve. Every time you see her, she is frustrated with some social issue or another. She is from an openly racist family and has been trying for decades to distance herself from this shameful past. She marries a person of color and has kids of color, yet she imagines she lives in a world that can be or should be race-ignorant. She prefers it this way. She is likely to believe that American society has a class problem,

In one day, a Black woman can experience all these White woman archetypes. She could be reeling from an email from Nancy, go into the office and face Kristy, get on a call with Lauren and Madelyn before facilitating a board meeting that night with Rose, and then drive home reflecting on a teary exchange with Beth.

and if we could just solve for that, then race differences would disappear. She is evading race and at the very same time is confronted by it whenever she refuses to accept that a capable Black woman actively experiences racism at work. She denies Black women's lived reality due to deep-seated shame related to her upbringing in an openly racist family.

Lauren is the antithesis of progressive, although she is adjacent to liberal circles. She exudes Southern contempt for Black people wrapped in feigned hospitality. For example, she will always say hello. That's, of course, the Southern way—genteel yet brutal. She has power, whether that be institutional, political, or financial. In many cases, Lauren is less educated than many of the Black women around her, but she doesn't need high levels of formal education. Her power comes from Whiteness. When you are with her, you feel something quite disconcerting and eerie. You try to stay away from her as much as you can, because at any moment something might come out of her mouth that is reminiscent of our plantation past.

Madelyn is an older liberal White woman who holds institutional power—and she wields it. She blesses and she withholds blessing. She has worked at several large institutions, possibly in labor, large national nonprofits, or well-endowed foundations. She is quiet and “strategic.” She knows how to navigate halls of power. She supports activism, is pro-LGBTQ and pro-abortion, and she gives the appearance of being pro-Black. She has many Black colleagues with whom she is very friendly. She mentors, she introduces, and she provides strong references. But she doesn't cede power, nor does she trust Black women's leadership. She maintains her position at the top of the racial hierarchy.

Rose is a liberal White woman who conceals her Whiteness with her Jewishness. She believes that when we talk about the racism that White people perpetuate, we should say *White Protestant*. That's because she either doesn't believe she is White, or she doesn't believe that White-presenting Jewish people can be racist, because of their own harrowing experiences with White supremacy. In meetings focused on the challenges facing Black communities, she will interject with Jewish concerns or blame Black people for their problems. She is very quick to accuse others of antisemitism even as her anti-Blackness is on full display. When confronted about her openly racist remarks, she becomes defensive and aggressive.

Beth is a young White liberal professional. She works in largely White spaces and lives in a gentrifying part of town. She votes Democrat every time and is a staunch feminist. She is ambitious and has her mind set on parlaying her law degree into a White House career. When faced with conflict, she calls the authorities or invokes the law to solve problems that don't require that level of escalation. In meetings, she will openly question Black women's qualifications or will interrupt or talk over Black women. When pressed about her behaviors toward Black women, this is her cue to begin crying. She is outwardly fragile and relies on tears and victimhood to maintain her power.

Nancy is a midcareer progressive White woman who checks all the right boxes in terms of racial equity. She is insecure, however, and wants the approval of the Black people in her network. She is personable and disarming, and she creates opportunities for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. She is comfortable talking about racism, and you come to believe that you can risk a relationship with her. When Black people say they need White people as allies or coconspirators, this is the White person they need. But you notice yellow flags suggesting that she doesn't question her biases as much as is required to live into true solidarity. This undermines her capacity to negotiate nuanced racialized conflict in the workplace. You feel confused in your relationship with her. One moment, you hold out hope that she has Black people's backs; another moment, you have a nagging feeling that she doesn't, because of her refusal to fully reckon with her Whiteness.

WHAT THESE ARCHETYPES MEAN FOR BLACK WOMEN

In one day, a Black woman can experience all these White woman archetypes.²⁹ She could be reeling from an email from Nancy, go into the office and face Kristy, get on a call

with Lauren and Madelyn before facilitating a board meeting that night with Rose, and then drive home reflecting on a teary exchange with Beth. Alone, each one of these experiences could be mildly irritating and deserving of simply an eye roll. Together, they are exhausting and destructive. Not only do Black women have to do their jobs with the pressure to perform at higher levels than is required for the job or of others who are not Black, but they also must perform the emotional unpaid labor of managing White women, their behaviors, and their racialized worldviews.

The health consequences of coping with racism-related stress are real and life-shortening. In her book *Weathering: The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life in an Unjust Society*, Dr. Arline Geronimus defines *weathering* as “a process that encompasses the physiological effects of living in marginalized communities that bear the brunt of racial, ethnic, religious, and class discrimination...and...afflicts human bodies—all the way down to the cellular level—as they grow, develop, and age in a racist, classist society.”³⁰ Dr. Geronimus points to studies showing that Black women who wait to have their babies in their late twenties and thirties are at higher risk of poor infant health outcomes than White women.³¹ I hope you caught that. *This research suggests that Black women’s bodies are deteriorating as early as their late twenties and early thirties*, the age at which White women have their *best* maternal and infant health outcomes. While this article is focused on the workplace, I point to these health outcomes to emphasize how the body gets implicated by racism-related stress.

WHAT BLACK WOMEN NEED

Black women need space to do the work with and on behalf of our communities without the additional labor and consequences of navigating White woman racism and other forms of racism and misogyny. There are workplace intervention studies being tested by Dr. Sanaz Mobasseri at the Boston University Questrom School of Business.³² Dr. Mobasseri and her colleagues are exploring the potential benefit to people of color in the workplace if White people can intentionally deal with their own insecurities related to Whiteness—and threats to the benefits of Whiteness—when people of color enter the workplace.³³ We need to go beyond DEI trainings and bring rigorously tested antiracist interventions to workplaces.

In the meantime, Black women need opportunities to heal. Transformative justice frameworks suggest several ways in

Black women need space to do the work with and on behalf of our communities without the additional labor and consequences of navigating White woman racism and other forms of racism and misogyny.

which harm repair can happen. In a 2021 presentation to the funders collective Resourcing Radical Justice, two practitioners, Richael Faithful and Whitney Benns, asked participants to consider repair strategies that depend on the level of relationship between the person causing harm and the person harmed.³⁴ Faithful and Benns explain, for example, that in an aspirational relationship (that is, an early-stage relationship), distance and a resource transfer from the person causing harm to the person harmed may be most appropriate. For the closest relationships, a cool-down period followed by small-group work, a repair process, seeking counsel, and a resource transfer may be most appropriate.³⁵ In the third sector, we do not have transformative, justice-inspired interventions and infrastructure to help us to name and repair the harm that has happened to Black women. Funders need to come together to create a fund to support such transformative justice processes in the third sector. The sector cannot continue its social change work externally while continuing to perpetuate and leave unacknowledged the harm that it causes.

Until this infrastructure can be developed (and I hope it happens sooner rather than later), Black women urgently need spaces to tell our truths, care for ourselves in community, prioritize rest and pleasure, and use breathwork and other somatic practices to release as much stress from the body as possible. The Association for Black Foundation Executives hosts an annual retreat for Black Women in Philanthropy.³⁶ Practitioners like Erika Totten (@toliveunchained) and Tosh Patterson (Black Goddess Collective) are coaching women and facilitating retreats with them.³⁷ I, too, am experimenting with offerings, such as an upcoming healing retreat focused on the intersection of pleasure, soma, and community building, and a soon-to-be-launched support group for women who are in active racism-related distress on the job. There can never be too many of these spaces.

In the podcast episode “Striving Is Bad for Your Health,” published by *The Dream*, Dr. Geronimus poignantly states that the stress-related deterioration of a denigrated group’s bodies (due to both the external stress we face and the high-effort, proactive coping strategies that we use to deal with that stress) happens even in our sleep.³⁸ Dr. Geronimus, who has focused most of her work on Black women, does not believe that having a positive attitude or engaging in activities like meditation while awake will reverse the health impacts of weathering. (Nor do I.) She says that what we need to reverse weathering is safety—which she describes

as “life-or-death safe” or the sense that “we can be [our] authentic” selves and “will be treated fairly.” Therefore, Black women are in a bit of a conundrum. Racism isn’t going away anytime soon, and our coping strategies won’t stop the weathering. For the foreseeable future, we will continue to get sicker and die sooner than we should. This is a sobering reality. But at the very least, while we still have breath, Black women should be afforded spaces to breathe.

This is my call to action for the third sector: *Create enduring, resourced spaces for Black women to breathe.*

NOTES

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Rise.

by Shanae' Calhoun

Resilient organizations are built on our backs and by the sweat of our brows. And we've been doing it with meager resources and credit.... We must refuse to let White-led, soul-crushing organizations and spaces exhaust us to the point of retreat. Organizational culture must be set by executive leadership.

I remember the first time I had to navigate a leadership challenge. I was a new, young, inexperienced executive director of a congregation-based community organization made up of faith communities working together for justice.

At 26 years old, I was 11 months into the job (and the life of the organization), and I had just organized the first—and most significant—civic event of my city at the time (2013) and in the annual cycle of the organization's calendar. It was our public debut in the Topeka, Kansas, community; 1,100 community members were packed into a ballroom, where the superintendent of Topeka Public Schools would be invited to the stage.

After hearing too many stories about children and grandchildren not being able to read at grade level, our organization had launched a campaign to address the problem. We found that out of 14,000 students from K–12, a devastating third were considered “at risk” of failing. The public education system had a job to do—and *it was failing*. After countless meetings with the superintendent, district staff, and other stakeholders, the superintendent agreed that something needed to be done—and we had invited her to our assembly so that she could announce the expansion of a program to help at-risk students improve their grades, behavior, and attendance.

On the night of the event, the room was filled with an electric current of anticipation and hope—but then the superintendent turned the tables on us. She refused to make a commitment.

Our spokesperson refused to let her off the hook. After asking her for a third time to reconsider her decision, the official burst into tears. A deeply diverse room of mothers, grandparents, educators, and more who had been assembled around a common goal of wanting success for the students was quickly divided by this White woman's tears. People—our own members—literally stood and walked out. The headline in a city newspaper the next morning read, “Group Bullies District Superintendent.”¹ The account of the event in the local newspaper introduced the organization and the event from one—unfavorable—perspective.



I spent the rest of that night and the next morning on the phone with my mentors, who were supposed to support me as an organizer and as the executive director of this organization. My organization had been thrown into a crisis of identity: our culture, mission, vision, and purpose were being called into question. I can state two things for certain: (1) that organization survived and thrived; and (2) it was not because of the mentorship and direction I was supposed to have been given as a new, inexperienced ED with the benefit of “training” from a parent network.

To Black women leaders everywhere: society was built on—and society continues to stand on—our backs. This is both a mark of honor and a heavy burden. In meeting rooms, coffee corners, and water-cooler chats, Black women bring our brilliance and resilience. But let’s not shy away from acknowledging the elephant in the room: the unique hurdles that Black women often confront in the workplace. I’m not interested in a pity party; rather, I seek to celebrate our strength, our tenacity, and our power to rewrite the narrative.

I spend my days sitting with women of color in leadership who oscillate between the power of being able to wear many hats well and the burden of seemingly having no choice *but* to do so. Do we hate or love the so-called *superwoman schema*?² Sometimes, our identity is at odds with it.

Being on the journey with these leaders as their executive coach has thrust me into deep reflection about my own leadership journey. I entered the workforce my sophomore year of high school. I played sports, participated in debate tournaments, and still worked part-time. My motivation: funding for activities, school functions, and college applications. When you come from a family of two working-class parents with five kids, you are grateful for lights, water, and dinner on the table. I was the eldest, and I did not want to be a burden. In fact, to that end, I also got my fictional “license” in babysitting services!

Shoot. I wasn’t even legal yet and already had my GED in the superwoman schema.

In 2010, Professor Cheryl Giscombé published a paper titled “Superwoman Schema: African American Women’s Views on Stress, Strength, and Health.”³ In an interview, she describes the schema as a framework to better understand how to conceptualize stress and coping in African American women. She identifies five characteristics Black women tend to embody:

1. “a perceived obligation to present an image of strength”
2. “a perceived obligation to suppress emotions”
3. “a perceived obligation to resist help or to resist being vulnerable to others”
4. “[a] motivation to succeed despite limited resources”
5. “[p]rioritization of caregiving over self-care”⁴

During the height of my leadership journey, I embodied all five of these characteristics. I thought it was a duty and an honor to work 60 hours a week, overextend myself to be a good partner and mother, and volunteer for my church. The systems that made up my world—church, work, and the media—convinced me to wear “superwoman” like a badge of honor. It seemed worth it when I looked at how resilient my organization had become. It seemed necessary when I saw my daughter showing exceptional development of leadership skills at the age of five. And then, during one particularly tough season seven years into my time as executive director, my emotional and mental stability crashed. I realized that this badge of honor only led to burnout. And then I was no good to nobody.

Around that time, I found myself in rooms with other women of color in leadership. Those rooms helped me to realize how isolated I had been for so long. Not being in community with anyone who looked like me both as an ED and as a community organizer had been a serious loss. Where were these opportunities when I had needed them most? Why wasn’t the institution responsible for my development helping me to connect with these spaces?

I discovered that we women of color leaders shared these common experiences that had brought us to a place of putting up our middle finger to the world. (I did not, but I wanted to—and I lived vicariously through the ones who did.) Being around my people helped me to surface a deeper meaning of my purpose. I thank God for putting me into those spaces designed specifically for women of color leaders.

Now, I design such spaces myself, so that young Black women can find community early in their leadership journey. I have transitioned from executive leadership to executive coaching. Together with my clients, we unravel the intricacies of navigating predominantly White workplaces, especially as/for Black women. We work together to dismantle the superwoman schema and replace it with liberation practices.

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I remember the first time I felt disrespected and treated unfairly in the workplace. It was during my junior year of college, when I was promoted from server to shift manager at the Park Ave. Diner on the campus of Florida State University. Folks were clowning around between shifts. I was packing up, and the next shift manager had just walked in. Somehow, we got to talking about hourly rates, and I learned that my counterpart, a White male who had been promoted after me, was making more than me. My nose ran hot like the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when the Israelites refused to turn from their wicked ways of oppressing the widow, the orphan, and the poor.

I had been there longer and could run circles around the man to keep the store running smoothly. The justification? “The man is engaged, so we figured he needed more money so he could start his family.” That would be the first of hundreds of biased things people have said or done to me in the workplace. I quit on Tuesday, picked up another job on Wednesday, and kept it moving.

Then, the second semester of senior year came. I was able to celebrate with my peers and my family that I had secured an internship before my graduation date. In those years, every college student dreamed about walking straight into a job after graduation rather than spending months—even years—looking for a job that put their degree to use. My opportunity was only an internship, at the end of which they could decide whether I was good enough to stay or not. But I counted it a blessing, anyhow. It was months of back-to-back meetings, long nights, and weekend commitments, but I was committed to being successful—a drive ingrained in me by my family to go 120 percent at all times for all things.

It was four months into the internship, and judgment day was soon to come. I had a check-in call scheduled with my trainer, during which I would share what I had set up and we would evaluate how close I was to meeting my goals. The person

who was supposed to be training me and supporting my development told me that what I had done over the past several months was not good enough. They made it clear that they did not believe in me. It was one of the most soul-crushing moments of my life. But one of my spiritual gifts is faith—deep trust in my source; and it is my very own faith in the will of God that carried me emotionally through that moment and provided me with every resource I needed to meet my goals, regardless of the obstacles. In spite of the feedback from my trainer—a White male—I crushed it: I got the job. And then came the first day of the rest of my community-organizing career.

For many years, I put my head down, ignored the micro- and macroaggressions, and pursued my goals. I excelled in spite of the capitalism, patriarchy, and White supremacy that engulfed my community and professional environments. When I “put my head down,” I became completely desensitized to the judgments, comments, questions, and decisions that should have given me pause. I gained willpower, but I suffered from not having the type of mentorship that would have provided support to my entire being, not just my skill set. Perhaps becoming numb to bias was a defense mechanism; if so, that defense mechanism served me well—until it didn’t.

It was the “Summer of Racial Reckoning,” in which the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd led to a rallying cry that would bring me out of a fog I did not even know I was in.⁵ I remember the precise moment the fog lifted. In August 2020, my husband and I were standing at the edge of our yard. A construction crew had ripped up the street and curb of our small cul-de-sac. Our street was lined with the homes of mostly retired couples and widows. The street was spotted with a few single professionals and a few young families—two of us Black. My husband was fussing about the weeds that were growing between the sidewalk and the street—reflecting the poor job the city had done to replace our grass. As we inspected the weeds, a pickup truck with

Dangerous questions and judgments fueled by bias are only two examples of the way White people—even when they believe they support us—contribute to unsafe spaces. Another is the box Black women are put in when we express ourselves with passion and/or assertion. Do not characterize me as “angry” or “aggressive.” Do not.

two middle-aged White men approached us. The driver was one of our neighbors, and a friend or relative of his was seated on the passenger side. My neighbor slowed down, seemingly trying to connect with us on the frustration of the terrible grade of grass seed that had been put down. Wheels still moving, the passenger yelled out, “What are you trying to do there, grow some watermelon?”

I had the most annoyingly delayed reaction to his bigoted comment you can imagine. My gut reaction was to smile. My husband looked at me and said, “Did you hear what he said?” Why the hell did I smile and chuckle at that racist comment? But the fog had lifted, and I refused to be complicit in the dumb things people say from that point on. Being desensitized, those comments used to bounce off me; now, my consciousness was forcing me to internalize the bias and bigotry. It is no coincidence that I began to have more anxious moments than I remember ever having had in the previous 32 years of my life. But it was also freeing and soul satisfying to be unapologetically Black.

That moment on the curb caused me to lament all of the times I had chosen not to stand up for myself. Like when I was sexually assaulted by a colleague and, after reporting it, discovered that questions about my past personal relationships and child out of wedlock had been raised between another colleague and my “superior” in the organization. In that moment, I chose to maintain the power of my spirit and not to address the questions with him or with my colleague—nor the disturbing fact that these questions had even been raised at all. Sometimes, when it serves us, we choose to command our own spirit and turn away from such aggressions. Today, I know that some people cannot understand my story and genuinely support me. Why? Because Black women’s bodies have been so oversexualized that people hold an implicit bias about positions Black women may put themselves in that can lead to harm.

Dangerous questions and judgments fueled by bias are only two examples of the way White people—even when they

believe they support us—contribute to unsafe spaces. Another is the box Black women are put in when we express ourselves with passion and/or assertion. Do not characterize me as “angry” or “aggressive.” Do not.

Recently, a White male board member gave my White female peers his account of a conversation between the two of us. He described me as yelling at him. Thankfully, my peers quickly dismissed this account and even named bias as the lens through which he had experienced the conversation. “That is out of her character,” my peers said to each other. “While she may have been assertive, it is hard to believe she yelled at that board member in a room full of people.”

The best and most fulfilling jobs also tend to be stressful ones: ministry, community organizing, youth advocacy, education, community development, and so forth. That is why Dr. Giscombé’s study of how Black women cope with stress is so relevant. I am tired of seeing Black people cycle in and out of meaningful work—specifically, nonprofit, social justice movement work. While a small few may not be cut out for the job, my experience and my gut tell me that too many Black people are pushed out of this capitalist system in which one is a cog in the wheel of a machine that only cares about hitting its own production goals on its own timeline.

That system is unwilling to meet Black people where we are and to take time to support our development. Some of us built up the superwoman schema so that we can survive the abuse of capitalism. And now I am on a journey to break it back down. Because while there are some benefits to being a superwoman, like self-preservation and preservation of the Black community, there are serious drawbacks, like the degradation of our mental and physical health. So I want to break it down and replace it with a community of love and abundance.

I built a strong and resilient organization, and I want credit for that. I want the people who come after me on the ground in movement work to have a structure of relationships built around them that caters to every human need they have, so that they can be the healthiest and most effective community

organizers they can be. I want the people who come after me on the ground in movement work to be given a chance to grow into their wildest dreams as changemakers and justice seekers, not pushed out before they even know what community organizing is.

It hasn't all been bad. The relationships I built along the way have shaped the deepest parts of my identity. The wisdom I have witnessed from my board members and fellow justice seekers has been inspiring and life changing. But in the midst of stopping to admire the color purple,⁶ I am calling all Black Women Bosses to task.

It is time for us to rewrite the narrative. Resilient organizations are built on our backs and by the sweat of our brows. And we've been doing it with meager resources and credit. While I watch Black women executives create caviar on a tuna fish budget (as one colleague has put it), I think about how we must at the same time demand more financial and developmental support for ourselves and our teams. We must refuse to let White-led, soul-crushing organizations and spaces exhaust us to the point of retreat. Organizational culture must be set by executive leadership. If that is you, then research, study, and invest in transformative leadership

practices that will foster real trust and unity even among the most diverse teams. If you are not an executive leader yet, invest in a support system: a leadership coach, a peer coaching group, a professional sister circle. Then, begin to challenge the hell out of the organizational structures that are oppressing you—one by one.



I am inspired by a quote by Albert Camus that I read in *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown: “The only way to deal with the unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion.”⁷ We deserve mentors and coaches who look like us. We deserve at least six weeks of paid vacation a year. We deserve leadership development training and retreats offered and paid for by the best organizations in our industries. We deserve spaces designed specially for women of color. Let's have this conversation in public—because change will not happen if the “ask” remains behind closed doors. Within every obstacle lies an opportunity for transformation. In the words of Maya Angelou, “And still, I rise.”⁸ Rise, Sisters; rise to something more transformative. The stage is ours.

NOTES

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Two Weeks in, I Already Wanted to Quit: Challenges Faced by a Queer Black Woman in Nonprofit Leadership

by *Nadine Bridges*

■
LGBTQ+ community centers are the spaces in which we can shift from mere awareness of the challenges that impact us to taking meaningful action. And if we want those changes, then White queer cis leaders and funders are going to need to both admit that queerness does not inoculate them against misogynoir and disrupt their privilege to create a better path for success for Black women and trans leaders.

■

As a queer Black woman in leadership—*often the first*—I want to emphasize the loneliness that has marked my journey to becoming the executive director of an LGBTQ+ organization in the nonprofit sector.

I have been gaslighted, discounted, and undermined at every junction of my career. I found that if I stayed the course, was successful, and did not outshine or question my White progressive counterparts, then I was okay—but as soon as I began to speak up about inequities occurring in my workplace, then suddenly I did not have emotional intelligence, or was taking things too personally, or somehow not only did leadership feel bothered by my “attitude” but also (phantom) staff felt the same. (Staff members were never named, leading to my paranoia vis-à-vis coworkers I once thought I could trust.)

This isolation has been especially pronounced in queer spaces, where I had hoped for a sense of home and an opportunity to create authentic strides toward equity, inclusion, and—especially—*belonging*. Sadly, I have often felt unsupported by my queer White counterparts, and that lack of support has been amplified as I move into my third year as the executive director of One Colorado—one of the state’s leading and longest-running LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations. Not only have I not received sustainable support, but I have also discovered, upon meeting with



Failing cannot be an opportunity for growth or learning for us, because for Black women and gender-expansive communities, failure is not an option.

community leaders and donors, that these same “inclusive” LGBTQ+ leaders with whom I often find myself in the same room (and with whom I have to pretend to be okay) have described me as “radical” and/or “combative”—and/or have flat out said to those community leaders and donors that they should not work with me or donate to my organization because they could do the work better. Hell, I have had these same LGBTQ+ leaders tell me that I shouldn’t trust other LGBTQ+ Black and POC leaders trying to make it in Colorado—so it doesn’t surprise me that they talk about me.

The mentorship I sought has been frequently stifled by territorialism, pride, or complacency. While many may profess to be allies and use inclusive language or hire staff of color, genuine action remains elusive—and I often wonder: If a person like me, who has positional power, struggles to feel supported, what does that mean for the rest of my community who do not have the same type of access? I find myself asking, Are queer White and cis folks who have been in the game for a long time willing to dismantle the status quo? Are they willing to put themselves on the line for their BIPOC and trans counterparts who do not have the same connections but possess valuable knowledge and lived experiences that can move our communities forward? Right now, my answer is a resounding *no*—and that has been heartbreaking.

A deep wave of nausea, sadness, and anger coursed through my body as I read through the recent report *Thrive As They Lead: Advancing the Infrastructure to Support Black Women Leaders in the D.C. Metro Area Nonprofit Sector*.¹ It felt like a full-on map of my own experience, complete with side and dirt roads leading to stress, anxiety, panic attacks, and pain. As the first Black person and woman to lead my organization, I have come across many of the issues outlined in the report. When I am lucky enough to be in a room with queer Black women and gender-expansive leaders, you hear these very same issues. We have dealt with staff and community having unrealistic expectations of who we are, funders who won’t return phone calls, and unsupportive board members. I have had funders who will connect with my gay cisgender male predecessors

but not with me. I have had foundations reject applications and say that my organization is not Black-led enough! Not two weeks into my role, the first hint that this wasn’t going to be easy was when a person on my board had the nerve to tell me that One Colorado was not a Black Lives Matter organization, and that if I thought I was going to run the organization like that, then I’d better learn, quickly, to pivot. Not once had I ever mentioned BLM in my work at that point.

Two weeks in, I already wanted to quit. Fortunately, other board members stood behind me and have been supportive, helping our organization to become antiracist/anti-oppressive—and I am grateful for that. But even with their support, it has been difficult. I have to admit that there have been many times since then when I wanted to leave. My golden handcuffs are that we already know that there is a stereotype about Black women leaders not being good enough. And even though I have done amazing things as the executive director in fewer than three years—including bringing in one of the largest grants the organization has ever received; ensuring that all staff are paid above market value; not taking a raise my first year, so that other staff could get raises; leading our staff in supporting the LGBTQ+ community members in Colorado Springs after the horrific murders at Club Q; increasing the percentage of Black and transgender/nonbinary/gender-expansive staff—apparently, that hasn’t been enough. I still have radical queer White community leaders attacking me. I still have elected officials questioning my relationship with other LGBTQ+ community centers in Colorado, because of unwarranted rumors. I still have donors refusing to meet with me. I still have White cis gay donors who stopped donating, saying that politics aren’t important to them or that we have become too trans focused. I still have LGBTQ+ leaders competing with me and other Black/POC-led LGBTQ+ organizations for resources that are specifically for advocacy work or to serve Black and POC community members. Rather than working with us to best support our community, they choose to duplicate services and take credit for them. It is exhausting.

How do you take care of yourself when you know that if you are not perfect, it could cause harm to anyone else who comes after you? Failing cannot be an opportunity for growth or learning for us, because for Black women and gender-expansive communities, failure is not an option.

My community, the LGBTQ+ community, is the embodiment of our ancestors’ wildest dreams. Much like our ancestors did before the shadows of White supremacy and colonization,

we are living our lives authentically and freely. I don't want to discount the vulnerable, hard times we are in—but seriously, we are living the life our elders could only dream of: our love, *queer love and expression*, is boundless, and it is our sacred duty to protect it at all costs. And that means protecting Black women and trans leaders who find ourselves leading LGBTQ+ organizations for the first time. Many of us are making history—Kelly Robinson at Human Rights Campaign, Imani Rupert-Gordon at the National Center for Lesbian Rights, Kierra Johnson at the Task Force, Nadine Smith at Equality Florida, Jaymes Black at Family Equality, and countless others—and we all deserve the same backing that our White colleagues had in these roles. We must actively work to dismantle barriers and nurture a society rooted in justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, and *belonging*. We must craft sustainable blueprints for *our* success.

I believe that LGBTQ+ community centers must be the birthplace of this transformation. LGBTQ+ community centers are the spaces in which we can shift from mere awareness of the challenges that impact us to taking meaningful action. And if we want those changes, then White queer cis leaders and funders are going to need to both admit that queerness does not inoculate them against misogyny and disrupt their privilege to create a better path for success for Black women and trans leaders. As a queer Black cisgender woman, I too must disrupt my own cisgender and able-bodied privilege to be accountable to the harm I cause—and I am asking that my counterparts do the same.

I am always saying that I don't want safe spaces, I want *brave* spaces, where vulnerable communities understand the power in our voices and can be fully seen and heard. Well, I can tell you that in my role, I don't always feel either seen or heard, or that I can live authentically within my role—and that is

unacceptable. Even while I write this, I am stressing out about how this will impact my staff, my community, and funders. I know that those leaders I have referred to will find some way to have their community back them while I take another thousand paper cuts to my soul. It's what keeps me quiet publicly. I know the costs of speaking the truth. However, in a time when I have seen so many harmed, I choose to put myself first and speak my truth—and I only hope that I am heard so that others will be heard too.

Many folks in my circle have asked me why I chose to take on this role, especially because I did so in the middle of a pandemic. And in the beginning, it was because I believed in the work of One Colorado—and although I never wanted to be an executive director, after speaking with community, I believed I could do it. I wanted to show how true servant leadership could be done and how a queer advocacy organization in a mainly White state like Colorado could be led by this incredible Black queer woman who leads with heart, strength, and grit. I'm not sure if I remain as hopeful as I was. Time will tell.

I recently had the privilege of meeting the remarkable Black, queer author George M. Johnson, who, at a Banned Books Week event, declared that we need more than allies; we need accomplices—and, further still, we need *assassins*.² An ally may stand behind you and offer support, and an accomplice may stand beside you and journey with you, but an assassin will stand in front of you to protect the most vulnerable, and allow you time to rest—especially, BIPOC and trans individuals who have been thrust into advocacy. Because if BIPOC and trans individuals do not fight, the consequences can be dire.

We need more assassins! We need to rest! I need to rest!

NOTES

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It Isn't Just Lonely at the Top, It's Downright Scary: The Reckoning Needed for Black Women Leaders

by *Jennifer Njuguna*

Doors have been opening, facilitated in part by the racial reckoning of 2020. At the same time, [Black women leaders] are experiencing the “glass cliff”: being hired or promoted into leadership, often in the midst of crisis, with unrealistic expectations to fix or turn things around and little room for error—causing severe burnout and often departure from these roles altogether.

I remember when I first read Maurice Mitchell's “Building Resilient Organizations: Toward Joy and Durable Power in a Time of Crisis,”¹ a flashpoint article published in 2022 that ignited a series of conversations and responses about progressive infighting within the nonprofit sector. The article brought me to tears. I finally felt seen and as though I now had the language to describe some of the experiences I have faced as a Black woman leader.

It certainly reflected the experiences I'd been hearing about from other Black women leaders. From the weaponizing of Tema Okun's tenets of White supremacy culture² to being chronically underresourced and expected to single-handedly solve the problems caused by decades of racism, capitalism, and other isms—Black women have been bearing much of the load from a myriad of directions: lack of funder and board support,³ challenging organizational and staff dynamics,⁴ extractive expectations of the nonprofit sector at large.

Yet having that language was validating. While Black women leaders in the nonprofit sector have, collectively, been facing the inflection point of major societal disruption and change, there are transformative actions that can be taken to ensure that Black women have expansive opportunities to continue leading—and three in particular address root causes of the challenges Black women are facing across the sector: *ensuring multiyear, unrestricted funding; trusting in Black women's decision-making; and confronting the societal discomfort with Black women holding power.*



AT THE (SEEMING) PINNACLE OF LEADERSHIP

Today, we are seeing ever more Black women leaders at the helm of nonprofit organizations,⁵ but there is still an overwhelming sense of disempowerment, speaking volumes about the relationship between the nonprofit sector and Black women. Doors have been opening, facilitated in part by the racial reckoning of 2020. At the same time, we are experiencing the “glass cliff”⁶: being hired or promoted into leadership often in the midst of crisis, with unrealistic expectations to fix or turn things around and little room for error—causing severe burnout and often departure from these roles altogether. This plight is well documented—the *Nonprofit Quarterly* recently reported on the findings of the Washington Area Women’s Foundation,⁷ which described Black women leaders as experiencing “hostility toward their leadership, strain on their health and well-being, unfair job expectations, and limited opportunities for career progression.”⁸ On the day that I read Mitchell’s article, I realized that the broad sense of disempowerment was not an isolated experience and was also less about the external, mission-driven work and more about Black women being seen, heard, and respected—especially at the seeming pinnacle of leadership.

These challenges that Black women leaders are facing are not due to a lack of knowledge about the issues. In fact, there is a plethora of information at our fingertips. So why are we still here? Why are we still having to fight so hard for our dignity? Why are we cloaked in power in the form of titles but with little else to show for it? I can’t help but replay Malcolm X’s quote, “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman”⁹—but at the same time, I can’t accept this as Black women’s fate. Thankfully, our foremothers have given us wisdom to navigate the challenges to Black women’s leadership, whether it’s knowing that “there are new suns” (in the wise words of Octavia Butler),¹⁰ or heeding the instruction from Shirley Chisholm to “bring a folding chair” when not given a seat at the table¹¹—or just making our own table.

As a collective (not a monolith), Black women have been the strength and backbone of social progress in America, especially in the nonprofit sector. Unfortunately, this includes having been the perpetual canaries in the coal mine,¹² pushing us to uphold America’s unrealized ideals. Black women deeply and often personally understand both the challenges and the solutions to some of our most pressing

problems across a variety of issue areas in the sector, including: health; economic, climate, and criminal justice; democracy; and others. Many of us have direct lived experience—our families have been impacted over generations, and we are rooted in broader communities facing the intersection of challenges in these areas. Given Black women’s proximity to the issues, we can also articulate the gifts of our communities and provide deep insight about the possibilities.

Many of us have chosen to work in the nonprofit sector to innovate and offer our solutions under the infrastructure purporting to advance mission-driven work. We also strive to build inclusive spaces, given our firsthand experience of being treated as both hypervisible targets and invisible outsiders. But as with our broader society, the nonprofit sector has perpetuated racism, sexism, and other isms that Black women face, even when Black women are leading. Our leadership alone is not a panacea—Black women continue to face the challenges outlined above. However, while this experience is not happenstance, neither is it inevitable—and the following actions can help to unlock and support Black women’s leadership in ways that are sustainable and that help us all realize the fuller systems change our society needs.

1. Resources and safe spaces

Multiyear unrestricted funding is critical for the success of Black women leaders. Such funding yields empowerment and independence,¹³ realized through choice and the ability to determine outcomes—key components of actualizing what it means to lead. In turn, this facilitates organizational sustainability and, ultimately, safer work environments for Black women. It is well known that organizations led by people of color, especially Black people, do not receive the same level of unrestricted, multiyear funding that many White-led organizations receive.¹⁴ When provided, such funding enables Black women to step fully into leadership rather than having to operate under the stress of trying to make an organizational dollar out of fifteen cents.

For example, unrestricted funding helps leaders to determine what strategic opportunities to pursue beyond short-term outcomes that do not advance broader mission and systems change; put into place critical operational infrastructure for areas that require investment but often get overlooked, such as IT and HR; build team capacity with people who have the

On any given day, there are countless trade-offs, tensions to balance, and difficult choices that must lead to decisions. Trust must include acknowledgment of these, and it must include space for Black women to do, to experiment, to make mistakes, and to pivot, without the automatic penalty of mistrust.

right skill sets for the work; engage in ongoing equity work and culture change work; and expand external capacity through coaches or consultants—all of which can help to ameliorate the overly full load, including the often unacknowledged and uncompensated emotional labor expected of Black women. Unrestricted, multiyear funding contributes to Black women leaders being sustained and feeling whole in the sector. With access to such funding, Black women leaders have choices and a full set of tools, and can determine what is needed across an organization without having to carry the burden of it all on our own backs. And it should go without saying that such funding must necessarily be put toward an organization's equitable compensation structure.

Unrestricted, multiyear resources can also support Black women in finding the external learning opportunities and safe spaces needed to thrive in the sector and strengthen leadership capacities. For example, there are many fellowships and other opportunities designed to provide such spaces, but they sometimes require financial resources and always require the resource of time. At Common Future, I was given support to participate in the Atlantic Fellows for Racial Equity,¹⁵ where I convened with other leaders similarly focused on equity and on eliminating anti-Black racism. It was a safe space where I was validated as a Black woman and could openly share the joys and challenges I was experiencing, learn from others, and engage with AFRE's excellent facilitators, who helped us to push the boundaries of our thinking about how to create a better world. I left those convenings strengthened to go back to the work of a sector in crisis, ready to problem solve. Other programs—such as Rockwood Leadership Institute,¹⁶ The Highland Project,¹⁷ the Institute for Nonprofit Practice's Black Leadership Institute,¹⁸ and Cause Effective¹⁹—similarly provide safe spaces apart from the work, with some designed just for Black women. Having the resources to join a safe space where we can grow, find support, and be renewed and reenergized to come back to work that is often exhausting and thankless is critical. Funders and boards in particular must grapple with how to

better resource Black women leaders with unrestricted funding to truly bring change to the way we do our work.

2. Trust in Black women's decision-making

While resources are absolutely critical, they get constrained when Black women are not trusted to make decisions. Trust means making space for Black women to have the autonomy and latitude to achieve goals. Trust also includes believing Black women's understanding of the issues, accepting the solutions offered, and deeming those insights as credible and attributing those insights directly to us. Trust is further demonstrated through right-sized resources to support the decision-making expected of leadership. It also means that the knowledge of funders, board members, or even other leaders is not automatically assumed to be, or treated as, superior to Black women's insights. And it means that Black women are encouraged and reminded of what we can accomplish, even on days when we don't believe in ourselves or feel like imposters. Trust is support and resources provided based on Black women's demonstrated potential, rather than waiting for the results of working twice as hard for half as much.

On a day-to-day basis, a lack of trust can play out in various forms. This includes micromanaging, nitpicking, constant questioning of decisions, and requirements for unrealistic amounts of data for every decision—evidenced by short-term investments, overreliance on narrow measurement and evaluation, and other strains on ability to bring big, long-term visions and solutions to life.²⁰ While sometimes framed as lack of clarity, these actually reflect lack of trust. Lack of trust is Black women being relegated to being talking heads when it's convenient or when it gets organizational points based on the optics of Blackness. *Trust in Black women must be daily and decisive.* On any given day, there are countless trade-offs, tensions to balance, and difficult choices that must lead to decisions. Trust must include acknowledgment of these, and it must include space for Black women to do, to experiment,²¹ to make mistakes, and to pivot, without the automatic penalty of mistrust.

I am not suggesting that there should never be any conflict or questions. Generative conflict is evidence of a psychologically safe environment in which we can surface what's in the cracks that lie under the veneer of the niceness that is so pervasive in the sector. It helps us to learn and thrive together. Destructive conflict, however, contains an inherent root of mistrust, such that any and every decision gets questioned or meets with skepticism at best and scorn at worst. Further, this is not always a top-down experience reflected in funder or board engagement. Sometimes it can come from staff in different places across an organization. It is difficult to say this, given the inherent power dynamics in organizational structures—yet informal social capital can be used as a sword, and death can certainly result from a thousand tiny cuts. There is a difference between grievances about the workplace and questioning its practices—indeed, these help us to examine and design a better workplace²²—versus anti-Blackness couched as a grievance but which manifests in power plays, false equivalencies, microaggressions, emotional manipulation, ignoring, isolating, and undermining. It isn't just lonely at the top, it's downright scary for Black women who are fielding such challenges from multiple directions. Thus, all stakeholders in the sector must examine their actions and whether those actions evince trust or mistrust of Black women—and adjust accordingly.

3. Comfort with Black women holding power

If trust is built in the proximate relationships we hold, then there is still a larger question to raise about how we collectively view Black women in our society. Given that the non-profit sector anchors us in mission-driven work, the sector is called to examine its relationship with Black women, and it must be an arbiter of Black women holding power—and not simply in title. *When Black women truly hold power, we have the freedom and space to exist in society beyond just the labor*

we contribute. We have space to flourish, to experience good health and wellbeing, to have balance, and to feel joy; we are equitably compensated; we have a voice and are listened to; we are supported; and we are able to help shape society and realize our dreams. It means that we don't have to bring a folding chair and squeeze in; rather, the fuller societal table is expanded, and all kinds of chairs are welcomed.

Full trust and comfort with Black women holding power requires continued racial reckoning, especially in the midst of false color blindness and legal (and otherwise) attacks on Black women's progress.²³ It requires the full disruption of the social and racial hierarchy at the center of our country's founding. Black women as leaders offend those sensibilities in every way: how can someone so far from who was envisioned in our founding documents be a leader, have the answers, and determine our fate? The resistance to Black women's leadership is so entrenched that even a sector that seeks to broadly change the world and advance rights, equity, and more is seeing Black women opting out. Society has always relied on Black women's labor but harbored deep fear and resistance to our power. There is an underlying assumption that our power will mean the same kind of power over, domination, and harm reflected in our country's founding and current existence. Instead, Black women have shown that power can be *with*, it can be shared, and it is not based on a single, patriarchal hero. It is found in community and it can also be influential and used to get things done—things that would fundamentally change our world into one we have yet to know. Some will have to lean into discomfort and face the pervasive racism in our society—the opposite of what the sector teaches us, which is to strive for politeness and accept how Black women are treated—if we are to get comfortable sitting in different kinds of chairs under the light and warmth of new suns governing new worlds.

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Women of Color Leaders: Shifting Power Dynamics within the Board–Executive Relationship

by *Tiloma Jayasinghe*

■ An upsetting number of women of color in...leadership positions have, over the past two years alone been fired or forced out of their organizations, or “chosen” to leave, or are confronting tense-to-hostile relationships with their boards around their leadership and stewardship.... There is a power struggle at play—an old guard having to make way for a new guard—and backlashes are ensuing.

■

An upsetting number of women of color in nonprofit and philanthropic leadership positions have, over the past two years alone, been fired or forced out of their organizations, or “chosen” to leave, or are confronting tense-to-hostile relationships with their boards around their leadership and stewardship of their organizations.

Numerous reports reflect on the exceptional pressures that women of color face when they are in leadership and the hardships and inequities that they must overcome.¹ Their experiences reflect the ways in which some women of color leaders are treated to a “know your place” lesson in terms of power: as soon as a woman of color goes too far and makes a board or staff member feel uncomfortable, she either gets her hand slapped or sees the values misalignment and makes her way out. Boards entrenched in the status quo of dominant culture are having difficulty with acknowledging and adjusting to the evolving realities of what powerful leaders look like. There is a power struggle at play—an old guard having to make way for a new guard—and backlashes are ensuing.

Women of color nonprofit executives are confronting implicit and explicit biases—we are working in a world not designed for us but being shaped by us, and we face more inequities and discrimination than our White colleagues. Being put into positions of power—and sitting in our power, exercising our power, acknowledging our power, leadership, and agency—often puts women of color executives in the crosshairs of extra scrutiny. Consequently, our hold on power is unusually precarious.



There is a tacit agreement, a balance of power, between every executive and their board: the executive consents to be governed by their board and their board understands that it doesn't run the organization.

This comes into play in a myriad of contexts, such as how funders resource (or fail to resource) women of color in leadership roles² and the ways in which women of color are hired into leadership roles³—but one that is often overlooked is how power influences how we interact with our boards. The stories shared further on in this article describe power struggles that women of color in nonprofit executive roles experience with respect to their boards. These stories highlight how women of color in leadership roles have to be extra attentive to the ways in which we wield and cede power—and the ways in which our power gets curtailed.

POWER STORIES

There is a tacit agreement, a balance of power, between every executive and their board: the executive consents to be governed by their board and their board understands that it doesn't run the organization—rather, it enacts its fiduciary duties to ensure the health of the organization by supporting the organization's leadership, and it works in partnership with that leader. You may point to your bylaws all you want—but practically speaking, no matter what those bylaws may include, the executive has to agree to (and uphold) the following in service to the health of their organization: share information; implement policies and processes that hold them accountable; and be supervised by their board. An executive has to, in effect, agree to cede some of their power and be governed by a board. And the board, on its end, has to acknowledge that its accountability, transparency, and supervisory capacities require it to be in right relationship with the executive—otherwise, its ability to discharge its duties to ensure that the organization thrives will be compromised.

In fact, we could argue that a board's power is positional, just as an executive's is—there is a balance of power, where each is checking the other to ensure fair and equitable outcomes that serve the organization. Yet boards are often unilaterally empowered to hire, supervise, and fire executives; make decisions about an organization's investments; determine strategy and other future planning; and oversee other big decision points. And they do so without any acknowledgment that they are holders of imperfect information, without any

acknowledgment of the need to act in balance with their executive—and further, without the understanding that because they are often distanced from frontline realities, they are therefore beholden to their executives to help them bridge these gaps and succeed in their roles.

Once you add a race and gender lens to this balance of power, those power dynamics become even more fraught. A board might question more, approve requests less often, or expect more power to be ceded, because patriarchy and racism enable those assumptions. It may perceive women of color in leadership as not authoritative enough, and take on more leadership power as a consequence. It may push back when it believes a woman of color leader has exceeded the limits of perceived authority (the “know your place” phenomenon). We still have glass ceilings to break. Women of color in leadership positions need to pay attention to the ways in which we have been acculturated into accepting limits on our power, both from external and internal forces. At every turn, we must ask ourselves the question, How have our society, culture, and environment shaped us and our comfort with leadership, power, and authority?

Women of color executives cannot afford to ignore this subtext underlying our relationships with our boards. As more women of color ascend to leadership roles, one of the strategies we can use to navigate how we choose to hold on to and release power is to *pay specific attention to the importance of being strategic in how we engage with our boards*. I base this caution on the three stories shared below—stories that are neither anecdotal nor, I fear, isolated incidents but rather larger truths prevalent in the nonprofit sector. The stories are a stark reminder that the power dynamics between a leader and their board can shape not only an individual career but also the trajectory of an entire organization—and further, the future of a field of endeavor. *The preservation of our power and leadership and that of generations to come depends on how we sit in our positions of power now and how we shape and are shaped by our interactions with our boards.*

For the wider nonprofit sector, these stories offer, on the one hand, an invitation to, very simply, interrogate the role and

If a board does not care about the executive, who will? And if a board uses its power just to control and not to uplift, is it even doing its job?

function of a board, recognizing the pivotal role that boards play in shaping organizational culture and success. To ensure a supportive board, board development should not be a passive exercise but rather a proactive strategy for inclusivity, whereby we go beyond token diversity metrics and really ensure that our boards view—indeed, *understand*—women of color leadership as a driving force behind successful and lasting social progress. On the other hand, these stories can also be a call to action, a resistance banner, to women of color leaders in the nonprofit sector. A call to sit in our power more boldly and to understand that our experiences are shared—and that while we may go through such experiences alone, we are collectively shaping the sector and the future through our pushing of boundaries, our naming of what is happening to us (despite often being helpless to change it on our own), our naming of the dynamics at play. These stories are being told so that women of color feel seen and so that we can realize that we are not alone, that we bear witness to each other, and that we can strategize together on how to support and practice *liberatory power*.⁴

Story 1: Start as you mean to go on

This story speaks to how women of color nonprofit leaders must be mindful in their day-to-day engagements with their board around how power gets shared. We often focus on scenarios in which things are more high stakes—leadership transitions, conflicts, large strategic decisions vis-à-vis the vision or growth of an organization. But it is in the day-to-day that strategies are baked, that power gets balanced or goes out of balance, and that we set the tone and culture of our board–executive relationships.

In this case, an executive stepped into an organization in which the board was very much a *working* board (a board that gets involved in an organization’s day-to-day activities, as opposed to a purely governance or fundraising board). She propelled the organization to continued growth in terms of both size and infrastructure, but she was not supported by her board: they routinely second-guessed her decisions; they operated as if they did not trust her expertise or commitment to the organization; and she was denied the opportunity to make key decisions. It is understandable that a board used to being involved in the everyday business of an organization

would find it challenging to let go of that responsibility. So, what was the executive to do? For the duration of her tenure, she tried to negotiate with her board: sharing information to support her decision-making, setting up committees to promote transparency in communication, accommodating as best as she could her board’s desire to be micromanagers. She did not push back, yet she was prohibited from exercising her power—from stewarding the organization as her role required. She was not even permitted to grow the board. She tried to nominate candidates who would be new, independent voices, but she was shut down. The board had set up an autocracy, and one in which the executive was merely the implementer of the board’s decisions. She was able to establish the necessary infrastructure to enable the organization’s growth, and to do fundraising and community organizing, and to develop the programs of the nonprofit; but the decisions that centered around vision, strategy, board growth, and her own compensation and support—areas where there must be a strong relationship, partnership, and sharing of power between board and executive—were held entirely by the board. And they did not care for their executive: they denied her pay raises; they created a hostile environment; they did not set her up for success at all. This board was abusing its power. If a board does not care about the executive, who will? And if a board uses its power just to control and not to uplift, is it even doing its job?

The caution here is for us to start as we mean to go on: how we start off with our boards—how we establish ourselves and how we push back and establish boundaries at the start—sets the tone for how we will be treated throughout. We must demonstrate what sitting in our power looks like. We must be at the helm, establishing values of trust, candor, and care with our boards. We must ensure that we shape board spaces to reflect those values. Certainly, we want our boards to be in leadership as well, but we must not let that happen at the expense of losing our own power. There must be a balance of power and shared values between the two parties.

Story 2: Handle internal conflicts in good time and directly

A visionary, seasoned executive and leader in the field had stewarded a thriving nonprofit to unprecedented strategic focus, growth, and vision. Despite the leader’s stellar

This story highlights how fragile the support of our leadership can be and the stark consequences that can occur when conflict resolution takes a back seat to the illusion of organizational stability.

reputation and decades-long unblemished management record, a board that was seemingly in alignment with her abandoned her when a challenging situation arose.

Staff members had been experiencing some interpersonal conflicts. When the situation eventually involved the executive, the board stepped in and took an at best, agnostic, at worst, antagonistic response to the leader. The board did not support her or seek to navigate the internal conflict from a place of trust; instead, it hired outside consultants to handle the “problem.”

These consultants were chosen for their reparative approaches, but they proceeded in a manner that positioned the leader and her team in opposition to each other. The executive brought her concerns to her board chair. She told the chair that she was willing to comply with whatever process the board felt was best for the organization but that she felt the consultants were causing harm. The board was nonresponsive. In the end, despite touting an equitable and reparative process, the board chose to summarily fire the executive. No clear reason was given—there were no findings of fault or wrongdoing. The consultants found that the executive had not managed the internal conflict well, yet they did not implicate her in any harmful action. Possibly, the board found that the executive had some culpability, but it did not communicate this to the executive and neither did it give room in the process for the executive to be heard and her point of view to be respected. The board provided neither feedback nor avenues for remedy, which it should have done. Instead, it abandoned and then fired her. (The shocking decision to disrupt the organization rather than navigate conflict may well have rippling effects in the nonprofit sector—however, much of what transpired is being held in confidence, behind nondisclosure and nondefamation agreements.)

Now, this executive may not have caused the harm, but she could have handled the situation better. She could have been more involved earlier on and managed the concerns more directly. Instead of stepping in with authority right away and making a decision about what needed doing to resolve the situation—which may well have involved firing a staff member—she had begun by directing the staff to try to sort

out the conflict themselves before she inserted herself. She also let the board take the helm once the conflict involved her. This is as it should be: if an executive becomes implicated in a conflict, the board is supposed to step in to supervise and do an accountability check. But even then, the executive must be in constant communication with the board—must keep clarifying the situation, must keep ensuring that the narrative does not get used against her. There are certainly bad executives—those who, in order to protect themselves, would seek to silence the voices of their team and to stifle the process. So many teams have suffered at the hands of bad management, of which their board remained ignorant, or an executive perpetuating a hostile work environment, in which the board was complicit. But when you know you’ve not done harm, and you can see the process derailing, as an executive you cannot throw up your hands helplessly. You have the most positional power in this context; and, if you are a seasoned executive, you have the weight of your tenure, experience, and expertise to assist you in navigating how you are perceived better than anyone else in the organization. You have the power, even, to *manage yourself*—how you show up as a leader in these moments of conflict—and have that define how a conflict gets resolved.

I share this story because I don’t want to set up women of color leaders as perfect, infallible beings. Sometimes we make mistakes; sometimes we misstep. As we navigate how we lead and how we show up in our power, we will certainly continue to be human. This story highlights how fragile the support of our leadership can be and the stark consequences that can occur when conflict resolution takes a back seat to the illusion of organizational stability. It also highlights something that worries me: if this can happen to a seasoned executive—one with a strong brand and strong appeal, and therefore one who might have been perceived as not being in a position of precarity—what does that mean for the rest of us? This story shows that navigating power dynamics, even for those we think are settled in their power, is precarious for women of color leaders.

Story 3: When coleading, don’t hide your light under a bushel

A pair of women of color codirectors had been growing their philanthropic institution together, when some differences

The board...did not have an understanding of the organization's potential, its place in the ecosystem, and its value. So when the institution faced an existential crisis, the board reverted to what it knew and valued—perceived power.

began to simmer beneath the surface. A subsequent annual review process only amplified the discord. Faced with codirectors at odds, the board intervened, tasking them with proposing potential new governance structures. The outcome was a testament to organizational misalignment: one codirector sought a solo role, while the other proposed various collaborative designs. The board's decision to favor the solo vision fractured the staff team, triggering a cascade of departures. Subsequently, the codirector who had become the sole executive left the organization as well, leaving it leaderless.

During their tenure, one of the codirectors had not shown up in her full authority and leadership; the other had—at the expense of her colleague, as it turns out. One was a seasoned, older leader who had started and led multiple organizations. The other was a brilliant, younger leader who had never before led an organization. The more seasoned codirector intentionally took a back seat, because she wanted her counterpart to shine—to not be overshadowed by her expertise. But in doing so, she suppressed the fullest expression of herself: she hid her power. And despite her belief that she had strong, trusting relationships with the members of her board, they did not perceive her as the leader for future growth, notwithstanding her track record. She had incredible vision, she was the source of growth for the organization, and she was a proven leader in the field—a respected social entrepreneur; but she was an older woman, and her counterpart was a younger woman. The board may have been implicitly biased against the seasoned executive because of her age; they were certainly explicitly biased against her style of leadership—in fact, it could be argued that they never understood or saw her real strengths, because she had taken a back seat to her codirector. Meanwhile, the younger codirector was an inexperienced and inadequate manager, but she had a high-level vision for the organization's future that the board found compelling.

The board was very distanced from the work of the organization. Many of its members were from the corporate sector, and while they loved the mission, they did not have an understanding of the organization's potential, its place in the ecosystem, and its value. So when the institution faced an

existential crisis, the board reverted to what it knew and valued—perceived power. The younger codirector made a power play, and won. The older codirector—who knew everyone, who possessed vision too big to be contained in a building, who had enormous power in the field—found herself being forced out.

In the social justice sphere, the phrase *power plays* has a negative connotation. Indeed, I have just now implied that the younger executive's power play was not inclusive. But that's my own bias, likely due to having been acculturated into being nice over being powerful. There's so much nuance at play here that this excerpted and redacted account leaves out—but at a minimum, it tells the tale of two forms of leadership and how sometimes we might have to show up in uncomfortable ways. Call it what you like: more powerful, more corporate, more dominant, less inclusive, less collaborative, less accommodating—but we are going to have to lean into all sorts of discomfort to truly sit in our power in these positions.

NAVIGATING BOARD-EXECUTIVE POWER DYNAMICS: TACTICAL TIPS

Not only are these three scenarios real but I've seen replicates played out as well via numerous other narratives floating around the nonprofit ecosystem: the head of a foundation who tried to push her board to take on more progressive stances and was fired at a board meeting; the leader who saw the writing on the wall and left before values misalignment led to outright conflict; the founder of a philanthropic institution who became demonized by her team and not supported by her board. They all left—either by choice or because they were fired. And they are all known, respected, “powerful” women of color in the field. If it can happen to them, what hope do the rest of us have to negotiate how we retain, wield, and cede power when we step into leadership?

This article has focused on demonstrating how power shows up. But let us move from the naming and considering of power to some practical, tactical tips to help us navigate the dynamics of power in an executive-board relationship. It is true that mutual respect, relationship building, honesty, and

My friends on boards...were chosen for the good that their professional skills bring to the organization. But make no mistake: when I recruit a friend to serve on my board, I tell them, “Your job is to love me, as well. Love me, and have my back.”

trust are key factors of a healthy board–executive relationship. As I speak to women of color here specifically, let me be candid: to succeed, we have to think of working with our boards as a chess game, and see five moves ahead—or think of ourselves as puppeteers pulling strings behind the scenes—to make sure that the story unfolds the way we want it to. This also ensures our ongoing safety. And by safety, I mean that given that we have less financial security, less perceived authority, fewer shared bonds that people use as proxies for relationship building—a White man seeing himself in another White man versus a White man seeing himself in an Asian woman, for example, and all other instances of bias hindering the fullest expression of our leadership—we have to do what it takes to ensure that we can inhabit our power and preserve our leadership. How do we do this?

1. *Review Cyndi Suarez’s book The Power Manual: How to Master Complex Power Dynamics and related articles.*⁵ I encourage everyone to read this book. Suarez makes the compelling case that “(1) one must constantly **refuse powerless identities** in interactions and (2) one can **build capacity for effective interactions**. It is in everyday interactions that one either contributes to unequal power dynamics or interrupts them.”⁶ She calls this power *liberatory power*—the ability to create what we want.
2. *Design and use the board matrix to your advantage.* Oftentimes, when we step into leadership and seek to grow the board, a current board member will request a matrix—or process—so that they can vet the candidate for what they feel the board needs. This is good practice, but you’ll find that boards that never previously had a matrix suddenly clamor for one once there is BIPOC leadership. This not just infuriating, it is also an exercise of power by the board that lessens our ability to exercise our own leadership power. But we can use that matrix for our own purposes and interrupt that diminishment of our power—and find a way to include our allies within that process and, through that, refute a powerless identity and assert our agency.

I entered into an organization where I had experienced exactly this scenario: the White woman leader before me had never had to withstand the level of scrutiny regarding board development that I now withstood. One board member explicitly stated his concerns that I might bring on only my friends to the board. Well, guess what? It is okay to have your board be populated with people who are your “ride or dies.” Nonprofit leaders can appoint whomever they want to their board in accordance with their organization’s bylaws—and there are legal checks and balances in place to ensure that both executives and their boards are compliant. It is why we have auditors and public filings: to promote accountability. It feels pretty bold to nominate board members, and that is because it is an exercise of power that we may not yet be accustomed to.

My friends on boards are excellent, brilliant people who contribute enormously to my organization and field. They were chosen for the good that their professional skills bring to the organization. But make no mistake: when I recruit a friend to serve on my board, I tell them, “Your job is to love me, as well. Love me, and have my back against any racist/oppressive nonsense. Definitely hold me accountable. Definitely be a strong check and balance to me. But love me. I am a stranger in a strange land, and I need my people.” I say something to similar effect to other board members—that I need them to be my brain trust, my advisors, my supporters. I would likely name that, as a woman of color leader, I face particular pressures and might need to have different kinds of support and awareness. Key takeaway here? The person growing the board has to be you. Nobody else. It is an exercise of power that we have to practice on an ongoing basis.

3. *Take the time to cultivate relationships with your board.* Do not just walk into board meetings. Take the time to get to know each board member. As we

When it comes to our relationships with our boards, we are dealing with shared power, with a dynamic of power given and taken in both directions—and we have to get comfortable with stretching into our power so that we can disrupt the moments when our power is being taken away from us.

practice exercising liberatory power, we must center relationships and the opportunities to transform inequities in power that occur between boards and executives that relationship building offers. Allyship doesn't just happen—it must be nurtured. Do not do it at the cost of your other obligations, like caring for your team and fundraising, but also do not ignore the power of a coffee or even a text exchange. You should know everyone on your board, and know about their kids, their jobs, where they're going on vacation. And they should know that you are a human being, as well. And to my earlier chess analogy: think ahead—every coffee you drink with a board member is an easier decision down the road. Do you want some key investments for your organization? Start networking a year in advance. Is there a key motion to be passed? "Socialize it" with your board in advance. And you shouldn't just rely on your relationship with your board chair; you have to know your entire board.

4. *Sit (or stand) in your power.* Women of color in leadership positions sit within a maelstrom of shifting power dynamics. We are taking (and claiming) space from people who have historically held these kinds of positions. Even when we are being seen for our inherent leadership, we are not resourced or supported to thrive. We bring with us our own experiences and backgrounds that shape how we feel about power. We have positional power, yet we are often powerless when we confront the systems and structures that surround us. I daresay we don't even think of our power as a thing to own and celebrate. We may think in terms of service, or support, but not as power brokers, power holders, power wielders. That said, power in and of itself is not bad, but it must be responsibly exercised. Too many cautionary tales of the despotic leader have curtailed our exploration of what it might look and feel like if we were free to exercise our authority. We are swinging the pendulum away from a place where

we weren't afforded power, and we must be mindful that we don't swing it too far in the other direction.

Conceptualizing power as liberatory power may help us to engage in this journey from a thoughtful place, but regardless of how we conceptualize it, power is complicated. When it comes to our relationships with our boards, we are dealing with shared power, with a dynamic of power given and taken in both directions—and we have to get comfortable with stretching into our power so that we can disrupt the moments when our power is being taken away from us. At the start of this article, I posited that there is a power balance to be maintained between the executive and board—an agreed-to sharing of power that sets both parties up for success. What we often see in reality, and as the stories above attest to, are situations where the power is not shared equally and even is used to harm or limit the power of the executive, particularly when an organization is facing conflict.

Accordingly, we should practice exercising our power to ensure that dynamic doesn't occur, as a strategy to help us hold on to our resilience and agency while we navigate systems and structures not built by us or for us. We are not the problem here. It's not the fact that we are leaders or that we are powerful that is in question. But when we come up against glass ceilings, brick walls, glass cliffs, and the harsh realities of patriarchy, racism, and other oppressive systems, we need tactics and strategies to help us preserve our leadership and power. Accordingly, on a case-by-case basis, we should reflect on how each interaction with our board presents an opportunity to practice what it feels and looks like to hold on to our authority and power more strongly in our interactions with our boards than we have historically done before. Take each engagement as an opportunity to level-set how we show up in our leadership.

[T]he struggle extends beyond the individual experiences recounted here; it reflects a broader narrative woven into the fabric of nonprofit organizations, where the ascent of women of color is often not met with the support and understanding that is both commensurate with their contributions and necessary to their flourishing and survival.

Like every other leader of color, I am trying to figure this out. I love my board. They are wonderful people. We have navigated many difficult situations. I am a deeply relational leader, and I have invested in developing a cohesive board that cares about me. But I must also think of the woman of color leader who comes after me. What protocols, what culture, am I setting up for the leadership to come?



The tales of leadership betrayals and organizational disconnects described in this article underscore a critical point: the struggle extends beyond the individual experiences recounted here; it reflects a broader narrative woven into the fabric of nonprofit organizations, where the ascent of women of color is often not met with the support and understanding that is both commensurate with their contributions and necessary to their flourishing and survival. The experiences shared by these leaders are not isolated incidents—they echo a pervasive struggle for acknowledgment, support, and fair representation by women of color leaders. To the women of color leaders who face these challenges, know that your experiences are not in vain. They propel a conversation that demands a reevaluation of power dynamics at the highest levels of the sector, a redefinition of allyship, and a reconstruction of the pathways to leadership.

Postscript

I'm a lawyer, and I had the good fortune and honor to be taught criminal procedure by Paul Butler, legal analyst and professor of law. Professor Butler spent an entire semester talking to us about habeas corpus, pretextual stops, the ways in which the state oversteps, and the limits on state authority over individual rights. We would have left that class ready to challenge any state trooper who pulled us over, quoting the Fourth Amendment left and right. But during his last class, he looked at all of us—but (I know I wasn't imagining this) I felt his gaze fall more on those of us who were BIPOC—and he said (I paraphrase here): *I don't care what you learned, I don't care how well you test and know these*

legal precedents and rules. If you get pulled over, you do what the cop tells you. You do not trot out the Constitution. You do not challenge their authority. Because you are one person being pulled over on the side of the road. It can't be one of us, alone on the side of the road, shifting this paradigm—it has to be all of us. It's too risky for us to take on this challenge one-on-one. So, if you get into some trouble with your board, lawyer up, sign that NDA, negotiate terms, and get the heck out. But make sure you journal or keep a record of what happened, because you will need to remember—you must protect yourself from being gaslighted. Then perhaps you might anonymize and contextualize your experience within a larger whole, so that you can get your story out there and ensure that your experiences are not silenced in the world. We have to use what tactics we can use, safely, to make sure folks know that many of us are harmed by a system not built by or for us, but that when we come together, we can move mountains.

I have been sitting with what happened to Claudine Gay. Regardless of critiques of how she could have done better at the Congressional hearings and in the face of the machinations that led to her resignation, what I saw was not just some of what I have written about in this article but also worse: her experiences, and the way that she was scrutinized, was a *shot across the bow to every other Black woman leader to not be bold, not push back, be more cautious*. This is even more devastating, and almost more harmful in the long term, because representation matters—but it's not just the image of a Black woman's face that inspires so many others, it is what she stands for, what her vision is, what her voice and vision represent. And it's what many women of color leaders experience: we often hit against this invisible line that we can't cross—we're *allowed* to lead until we make the dominant culture uncomfortable or until we hit a line where we need to "know our place." We have to maintain inspiration, maintain courage, and preserve our leadership—leadership that is the fullest expression of our power and our vision and our brilliance. We may make decisions to survive, to get out of situations that are simply untenable

for our values, morals, and health, but our spirit inside *cannot* be vanquished. Let us keep working together, talking to each other, and supporting each other as we navigate to change this world. I commend NPQ for doing this kind of work. I look forward to the revolution.

NOTES

1. Frances Kunreuther and Sean Thomas-Breitfeld, *Nonprofit Executives and the Racial Leadership Gap: A Race to Lead Brief* (New York: Race to Lead, Building Movement Project, 2019); and Michelle Flores and Elena Conte, *Brilliant Transformations: Toward Full Flourishing in BIPOC Leadership Transitions* (New York: Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, 2023).
2. Numerous articles name the racial gap in philanthropic giving, and this is even more exacerbated with respect to women of color nonprofit leaders. See Frances Kunreuther and Sean Thomas-Breitfeld, *Trading Glass Ceilings for Glass Cliffs: A Race to Lead Report on Nonprofit Executives of Color* (New York: Race to Lead, Building Movement Project, 2022); and Cheryl Dorsey et al., “Overcoming the Racial Bias in Philanthropic Funding,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, May 4, 2020, ssir.org/articles/entry/overcoming_the_racial_bias_in_philanthropic_funding. See also “Racial Equity In Philanthropy—Collected Resources: Closing the Funding Gap,” The Bridgespan Group, accessed February 7, 2024, www.bridgespan.org/insights/racial-equity-in-philanthropy, for a wealth of articles naming racial disparities in funding people of color generally, but with specific reference to women of color.
3. See Building Movement Project, *Making (or Taking) Space: Initial Themes on Nonprofit Transitions from White to BIPOC Leaders* (New York: Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, 2021).
4. Cyndi Suarez, “Effective Interactions: Supremacist Power and Liberatory Power,” *NPQ*, November 28, 2018, nonprofitquarterly.org/effective-interactions-supremacist-power-and-liberatory-power/.
5. Cyndi Suarez, *The Power Manual: How to Master Complex Power Dynamics* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2018); and see for example Cyndi Suarez, “Introduction to Power,” *NPQ*, June 7, 2022, nonprofitquarterly.org/introduction-to-power/; Cyndi Suarez, “Experiments in Liberatory Leadership,” *NPQ*, June 7, 2022, nonprofitquarterly.org/experiments-in-liberatory-leadership/; and Cyndi Suarez, “Forms: A New Theory of Power,” *NPQ*, March 18, 2021, nonprofitquarterly.org/forms-a-new-theory-of-power/.
6. Suarez, *The Power Manual*, 13.

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Building a Reparative Organization and Nation

by *Aria Florant*

Our organizations exist to achieve important goals, and when we're consumed by painful turmoil internally, it becomes increasingly impossible to focus on those goals. To meet these challenges of our time, we must work together across difference.

I, among many other Black leaders, have struggled with cultural challenges inside the racial justice organization I run. Last fall, when Ibram X. Kendi's Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University became the latest racial justice organization to undergo scrutiny,¹ I realized it was time to tell my story.

The financial struggles and cultural issues of progressive organizations, especially those focused on racial justice, have been hot topics over the last 18 months. Many recent essays on the subject, from Maurice Mitchell's "Building Resilient Organizations"² to *The Forge's* conversation among five movement leaders discussing Tema Okun's article "White Supremacy Culture,"³ have covered the internal challenges many organizations are facing. As the cofounder and CEO of Liberation Ventures, an organization focused on accelerating the Black-led reparations movement, I know that despite the increase in conversation, it remains difficult *and necessary* to walk the talk of shifting internal organizational cultures to align with the world we're trying to build.

The *New York Times* has characterized this moment as a "fever breaking" and "the left eating itself," but these analyses are incomplete.⁴ To get to solutions, we must develop a deeper, root-cause-level diagnosis of what is happening. *Why* are people weaponizing Okun's article—as she describes,⁵ using it "to accuse, shame, and blame in ways that perpetuate disconnection"?⁶ *Why* are so many nonprofit employees feeling the need to unionize?⁷ *Why* are coleadership models proliferating (and sometimes failing)?



These challenges have sometimes been productive, helping me to identify and root out harmful patterns, such as perfectionism. Other times, they have been weaponized in ways that policed my Blackness, eroded accountability across the organization, and reduced me to racist stereotypes.

One fundamental issue driving these dynamics is our sector's collective relationship to power. Many who fight for freedom and liberation are used to being abused by power, and that abuse creates trauma. We often don't trust power—and as a result, it is hard to admit when we have it and learn to use it more effectively. As a sector, we need to transform our relationship to power. We must learn to name it, own it, work with it, and intentionally distribute it. In order to do that, we must build reparative organizations. Together, we must heal.

The stakes are high. Authoritarianism is at our doorstep, and we will need a broad coalition to force its retreat. Organizers have worked tirelessly over the last several decades to ripen the issue of structural racism and police violence, which created a window of opportunity for progress that will eventually close. Our organizations exist to achieve important goals, and when we're consumed by painful turmoil internally, it becomes increasingly impossible to focus on those goals. To meet these challenges of our time, we must work together across difference to build the strong, multiracial organizations and democracy we all deserve.

SELF: THE IMPACT ON LEADERS AND ORGANIZATIONS

As the CEO of Liberation Ventures, I am in perpetual inquiry around how to build a healthy, aligned organizational culture. I have tried coleadership models that failed, and Okun's article has been wielded against me in painful ways. These challenges have sometimes been productive, helping me to identify and root out harmful patterns, such as perfectionism. Other times, they have been weaponized in ways that policed my Blackness, eroded accountability across the organization, and reduced me to racist stereotypes.

With hindsight—and full acknowledgment that I and Liberation Ventures remain a work in progress—I can zoom out and see how the challenges our organization faced were heavily influenced by our broader external context. But at the time I faced those challenges, I couldn't; everything felt personal. After a decade of working in racial justice, much of my identity was built on having a sharp critique and showing up in ways that advance the work. I had run programs and campaigns focused on youth and community development, and had organized for racial equity in my schools and workplaces. Failing at coleadership and being associated with White supremacy culture consumed me with shame.

This propelled a cycle of harm that stunted Liberation Ventures in its early days. My shame caused me to bend over backward to meet others' needs, disregarding my own boundaries for fear of further failure and disconnection. That fear led to standards of perfection that I could not meet, which led to feelings of unworthiness, inadequacy, and, ultimately, more shame. The cycle continued.

On a day-to-day basis, I blamed myself, lost confidence, and made myself smaller. I was timid in external meetings and afraid to build relationships with peers, because deep down I wondered if there was something wrong with me. I prioritized minimizing conflict and did not raise sensitive issues with my team, which led to miscommunication and misalignment. I didn't understand or own the power I did have, which meant I wielded it unconsciously in unhelpful and sometimes harmful ways. Talented potential hires sensed something was off and decided not to join our team, limiting our capacity at crucial moments. My judgmental internal monologue drained my energy and mood, making it hard for me to show up with the joy and abundant mindset the work deserves. I constantly questioned my judgment, and, at my lowest low, my entire worth. Leadership is always difficult, but this time was especially debilitating.

I now understand that many people, especially leaders and entrepreneurs in our sector, have gone or are going through something like this. On the positive side, realizing how widespread these issues are enabled me to develop a much more systemic diagnosis of the problem, which has helped me to own my mistakes, depersonalize the issue, and heal. Yet simultaneously, thinking about what my organization and I have been through, applying that more widely to the sector, and understanding the scale of the harm it has caused to our

movement's greatest asset—our people—has been horrifying.

Harm requires repair. Liberation Ventures has been explicitly focused on building a culture of repair inside our organization over the past couple of years. We are making mistakes, learning, and growing. But our commitment to repair inside our organization is helping us do the micro level version of what our nation must do at the macro level to build a strong multiracial democracy: hold breakdown, conflict, and grief with care and respect, and build new systems for naming and distributing power. I'm sharing our story with hope that our journey may be instructive to others on the same path.

ROOT CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS

I consider myself a lifelong student of power—its rules, its contradictions, its benefits, and the challenges that it confers. I define it as the ability to influence my own or another's circumstance. I've learned that it is never neutral; it either helps or harms.

Power can feel shameful to have—especially as a person of color—because it is so often associated with its abuse. Leadership coach, strategist, and racial equity advocate Karla Monterroso has developed a detailed taxonomy of different forms of power, including historic forms like wealth and institutional authority.⁸ In addition, she notes new forms of cultural power, such as a megaphone (e.g., social media followers), identity capital (e.g., informal authority conferred by a specific identity in a specific context), access to information and technology (e.g., having the internet at our fingertips), and compelling communication (e.g., oration, writing, building a pitch deck).⁹ Understanding these various kinds of power is critical—because when we don't understand our own power, we are more likely to unintentionally abuse it.

Although many progressive organizations are externally focused on building power, we often have trouble internally identifying what power looks like within our organizations, where that power sits, and why. This amplifies feelings of powerlessness, especially for those without positional power, and leads to struggles to change power differentials.

Weaponizing Okun's article is one way members of progressive organizations sometimes attempt to rebalance power. While the document can be useful to surface cultural dynamics, it can also be weaponized against leaders—especially leaders of color—in oversimplified, unspecific ways that

The dynamic is especially painful when traditional power structures are inhabited by people of color, because those leaders are already held to higher standards than their White counterparts. It feeds racist tropes about how leaders of color, especially Black women, are supposed to operate.

leave leaders with little insight on how they can improve their leadership. Okun herself laments that her work has been used in this way.¹⁰ The most dangerous part of this dynamic is that it is often unconscious; weaponizing Okun's document is an exercise of power, yet those who weaponize it often believe that they have no power at all.

The dynamic is especially painful when traditional power structures are inhabited by people of color, because those leaders are already held to higher standards than their White counterparts. It feeds racist tropes about how leaders of color, especially Black women, are supposed to operate (e.g., as emotional caretakers and/or strong Black women) and reinforces the message that leaders of color must be twice as good. We *all* know that traditional institutional structures are failing us and that we need to reinvent them, but we don't know how. We expect Black women to have all the answers—but we Black women are human, too.

This dynamic also disregards one of the most fundamental truths most progressive organizations hold: people's structural and positional conditions have a huge impact on how they act. For example, we know criminality is not inherent in people; crime is a symptom of systemic forces that cause trauma, disenfranchisement, and need. This is why our movements focus on fixing structures and systems, not people. The rush to label organizational practices of a Black leader as sustaining White supremacy culture is rarely about an individual person's character but rather is about the pressures they are under, interests they must manage, and the authority role they hold.

There is good reason why this happens. People of color, especially Black people, have been traumatized by people in

When we expect perfection in leadership, we give up our individual and collective power, and the entire enterprise suffers. This is true in our organizations as well as our nation.

power our whole lives—in our workplaces, churches, schools, and streets. The past decade has finally helped us to build the identity capital we need as a movement to push back, and we are doing so in full force. Yet instead of taking a more nuanced perspective about the services that authority figures provide—direction, protection, and guidance—and evaluating what an organization needs and when, too often we throw the baby out with the bathwater and reject authority wholesale, resulting in the antileadership and anti-institutional attitudes that Mitchell discussed in his article.¹¹

If a feeling of powerlessness is a driving force behind Okun's document being weaponized, that powerlessness looks different for people with different identity characteristics. The *Forge's* article commented on the irony of White staff wielding it against leaders of color.¹² I believe this happens because in social justice spaces, Whiteness often operates opposite the mainstream: instead of increasing a person's identity capital, it decreases it. Rightly, our sector's push to center those with lived experience of the problems we are trying to solve means that in racial justice organizations, Whiteness decreases one's authority. Therefore, White people who are used to their Whiteness conferring power experience a sense of loss. Okun's article then becomes a tool to try to manage that loss, escape accountability to someone else (often a person of color), and regain control.

The target may be the authority role, but the person in the role becomes collateral damage. Reducing a person to their role is dehumanizing, and it is exactly the kind of exploitative practice that Okun's article, and our movement, purport to abhor. It is critical for mid- and lower-level staff to understand that the leaders of their organizations are human, too—and often forced to make heartbreaking trade-offs amid extreme pressures to keep their organizations afloat. Leaders must hold themselves accountable for creating a healthy and compassionate work environment, and face consequences when they do not. Leaders also deserve to feel seen and cared for

in the work, and compassion across levels of power and authority is critical to building just and equitable organizations and a just and equitable world.

As a movement, we need an interdependent relationship with power rather than a dependent or counterdependent one. Most authority figures are neither enemies nor saviors but rather imperfect humans with specific influence who can help get things done—but who cannot be effective alone. This means we must be willing to work *with* them, not just for (or against) them. Seeing the humanity in our leaders is critical not only for healthy organizations but also for a healthy and just multiracial democracy. At the state level, if we believe that politicians are perfect and supposed to solve all our problems, we give away our agency as a constituency: we put less pressure on elected officials to fulfill campaign promises, we make fewer policy recommendations and demands, and we pay less attention to what elected officials are getting done. This posture toward government accelerates a decline into authoritarianism, because it allows political leaders to become less accountable to the people they represent. When we expect perfection in leadership, we give up our individual and collective power, and the entire enterprise suffers. This is true in our organizations as well as our nation.

A FRAMEWORK FOR REPAIR

How can progressive organizations internally improve their ability to name, own, and distribute power? To do so, we have to begin to heal from our traumatic relationship to power—and all of us must become agents of repair.

At Liberation Ventures, our vision is to build a culture of repair in this nation. We define repair as four distinct components in an iterative cycle: *reckoning*, *acknowledgment*, *accountability*, and *redress*. *Reckoning* means learning and deeply understanding harm; *acknowledgment* means naming and voicing that understanding; *accountability* means taking ownership and responsibility for repair; and *redress* means restitution, rehabilitation, and taking proactive steps to heal the wound.¹³

We recently published a report, *A Dream in Our Name*, that outlines this repair framework and its lineage in more detail.¹⁴ It builds upon elements of transitional justice, transformative justice, restorative justice, and abolition. These words from Malcolm X can help us understand the repair process: "If you stick a knife in my back nine inches

BUILDING A REPARATIVE ORGANIZATION: LIBERATION VENTURES FRAMEWORK AND TOOL

Goal	Activities	Key Questions
<p>RECKONING: Learn and understand harm, power dynamics, and lived experience across the organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Individual reflection ● Facilitated listening sessions across the organization that are held by a third party 	<p>FOR ALL: What kind of power do I have and not have, and in what kinds of spaces? Have I shared my own lived experience and let others see my humanity? Do I understand my own triggers and relationship to power and how they influence the way I show up at work?</p> <p>For Leaders: How am I currently using my power well, and how am I using it poorly or even abusing it? In what scenarios must I share or distribute my power to advance the work, and what structures are in place to help me do so?</p> <p>For Staff: Do I understand who holds what kind of power in the organization and what kinds of decisions can be made at what place in the org. chart? Is this clear to all staff? Do I understand why some people have positional power and the experiences that led to them being in that position?</p> <p>For Boards: Have we communicated why we support organizational leaders to be in the positions they are in? Do we understand how we have contributed to the cultural dynamics in the organization?</p>
<p>ACKNOWLEDGMENT: Name learning, voice apology, affirm humanity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Facilitated conversations sharing insights from the reckoning phase ● Workshops on power dynamics for teams ● Articulated learnings and mistakes 	<p>FOR ALL: Do I see, and have I articulated, the humanity of all people in this organization? Have I apologized to those I need to apologize to? Have I voiced my insights from the reckoning phase?</p> <p>For Leaders: What do I need to voice out loud to the organization to chart a new path forward?</p> <p>For Boards: Have we internally or externally communicated what we learned from the reckoning phase, and have we acknowledged harm that we have implicitly or explicitly caused?</p>
<p>ACCOUNTABILITY: Build capacity and commitment to take action</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Discussion of organizational structures with clarity given about where decision-making power sits across levels and how decisions get made ● Creation of cultural practices that support naming and working with power and that upskill staff (e.g., delivering and receiving constructive feedback, having courageous conversations, holding conflict and complexity, expressing appreciation and gratitude) 	<p>FOR ALL: What actions or practices must I commit to (e.g., changing a mindset, changing a behavior)?</p> <p>For Leaders: What institutional changes must be implemented (e.g., changing a process, shifting where decision-making power sits)?</p> <p>For Staff: What clarity do I need about my role, my decision-making authority, or what I am accountable for? What support do I need, from leadership and elsewhere, to build the capability to do the practices listed in the activities column?</p> <p>For Boards: What new structures and processes are needed to prioritize the organization's values? What personal work might be necessary for us to institute needed new structures and processes? Is this body composed of the right people for the organization?</p>
<p>REDRESS: Restore, rehabilitate, and heal</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Individual healing practices (e.g., coaching, therapy, unlearning perfectionism) ● Organizational healing practices (e.g., vacation and benefits norms, healing stipends, facilitators to mediate conflict and enable repair) 	<p>FOR ALL: What rituals or practices do I need to engage in to heal from my experience and to sustain myself in this work for the long term? What can I do to restore relationships with my colleagues? Who can I learn from to do this work (e.g., Dr. Shawn Ginwright, Resmaa Menakem, adrienne marie brown)?</p> <p>For Boards: How can I support organizational leaders in building a culture of repair?</p> <p>For Funders: How can I support repair, healing, and wellness in the organizations I fund?</p>

Orienting the sector toward repair would allow leaders and organizations to make mistakes, learn from them, and become stronger in the process.

and pull it out six inches, there's no progress. If you pull it all the way out, that's not progress. The progress is healing the wound that the blow made."¹⁵ *Reckoning* understands how and why stabbing occurred. *Acknowledgment* admits the knife is there. *Accountability* removes the knife. *Redress* treats the wound.

At Liberation Ventures, we believe this racial repair framework can operate from the micro to the macro, and we use it internally when someone causes harm, so as to build a culture of repair. It is not only applicable to us—it is also an offering to our sector as a tool to repair harm from the many challenges facing our organizations. We make this offering with humility and hope: we do not have all the answers, and we still have many unanswered questions about what is required for real repair—and yet we know hope is a discipline. Perhaps if we are disciplined about building a culture of repair within the fractal of our movement, we'll be one step closer to doing so across our nation.

All four components of our repair framework are critical—alone, they are unsatisfactory. Together, they make each other real. Furthermore, this framework doesn't work with one-time application. It must be a constant practice, embedded into the culture of our institutions and sector at large. We created a tool based on this framework, to support organizational leaders, staff, and other actors across the sector to become active agents of repair.¹⁶ Teams can initiate facilitated conversations on the questions the tool poses. Management and DEI consultants can help clients not only create inclusive cultures but also name and work with power within

their organizations in new ways. Funders can designate funds for coaching, team facilitation, and wellness, and they can eliminate tedious measurement and reporting requirements that unnecessarily pressure grantees. Board members can broach the topic of repair with leadership teams to understand in detail what is happening inside the organizations they govern: where leaders need support, where staff have complaints that must be addressed, and, most important, how boards can adapt their governing structures to promote transparency, repair, and distribution of power.

Orienting the sector toward repair would allow leaders and organizations to make mistakes, learn from them, and become stronger in the process. In response to the critique of his center, Kendi wrote:

Leaders of color and women leaders are often held to different standards and routinely have their authority undermined or questioned. But I want to live in a world where *all* leaders of new organizations are given the time to make mistakes and learn and grow. I want to live in a world where *all* new organizations are given the time to have growing pains and develop. I want to live in a world where we are *all* about building and sustaining antiracist organizations.¹⁷

I want those things, too, and repair is required to get there. Our sector and nation must be able to hold not only difference but also the alchemy of *real belonging* across difference. Holding difference enables us to reap the benefits of the wide variety of skills, assets, and experiences—and the generative conflict they create—that enable us to thrive and win. The challenges of our time require us to build a culture of repair, because difference can and will cause breakdown, and our organizations, coalitions, and democracy are only as strong as our ability and willingness to repair it.

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There Is Nothing Uncomplicated about Being a Black Woman Leader

by Cicley Gay

■ Black women [are] being promoted into leadership positions and then given the near-impossible task of fixing a broken culture or turning around an insolvent organization, all while incurring the added labor and toll of acting as representatives for one or many systemically marginalized identities and populations. ■

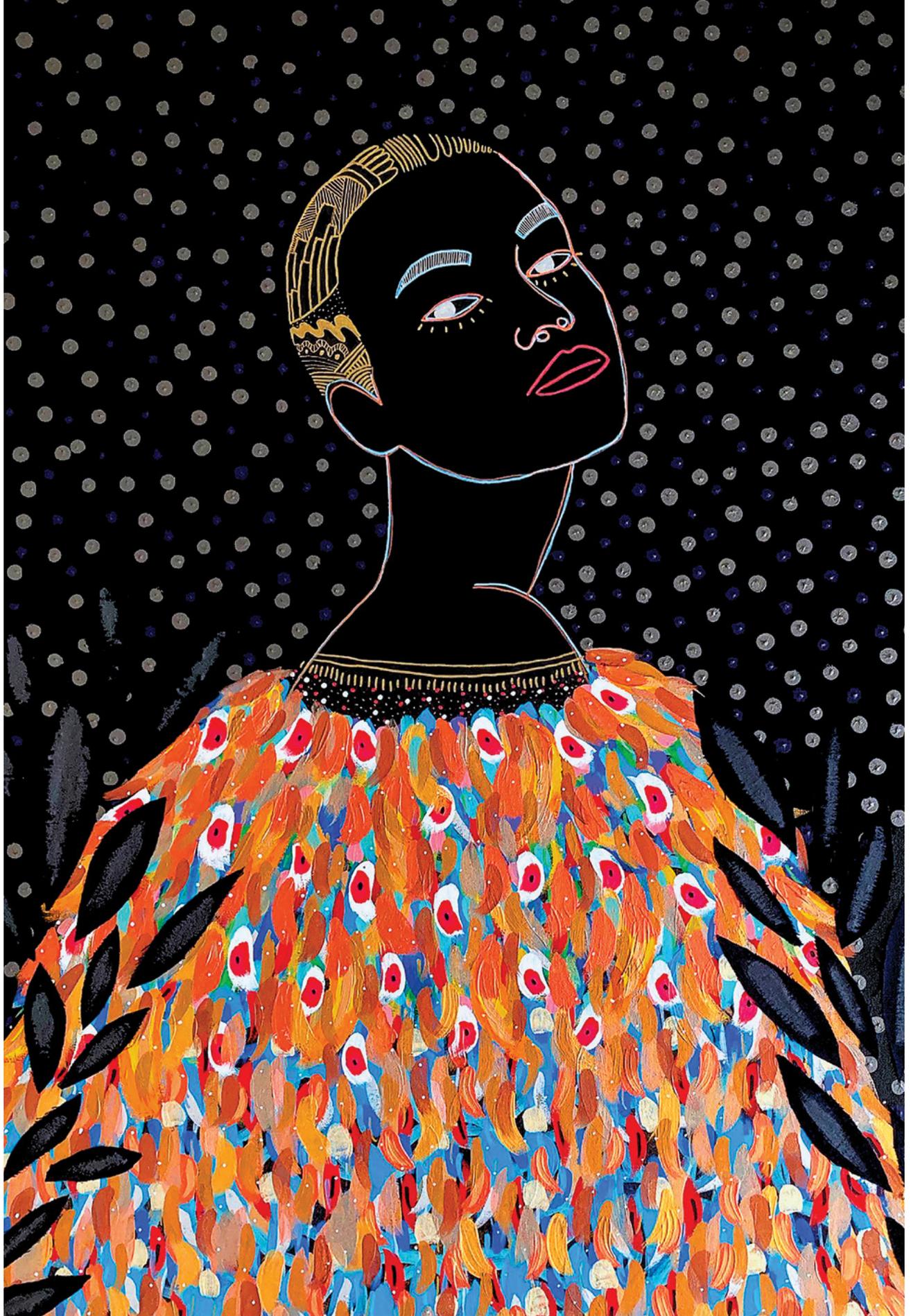
I.

There is nothing uncomplicated about being a nonprofit leader—let alone a Black woman nonprofit leader, and a Black woman nonprofit leader of the largest Black abolitionist philanthropic organization ever to exist in the United States.

Historically and to this day, nonprofit organizations regularly reify the same systematized inequities they are founded to uproot. Employees often find themselves eligible for and reliant on public benefits to make ends meet. Nonprofit leaders are held to the implicit standard that cause-driven professionals take an “oath of poverty” while fighting to eradicate the pernicious social ills to which they themselves remain materially vulnerable.

NPQ is one of many leading publications documenting a growing crisis for Black women in leadership in the United States, both within and beyond the nonprofit sector. The through line of “a fundamental absence of trust”¹ is no news to Black women leaders like me—whether we cut our teeth in corporate America, as entrepreneurs and business owners, in movement work, as part of the philanthropic sector, or as lifelong public servants. The phenomenon of the “glass cliff”² is on full display in post-pandemic America—Black women frequently report experiences of being promoted into leadership positions and then given the near-impossible task of fixing a broken culture or turning around an insolvent organization, all while incurring the added labor and toll of acting as representatives for one or many systemically marginalized identities and populations.

This double bind is even more acute for those leading public-facing social justice organizations and movements. Today, the most high profile of these is, arguably, Black Lives Matter.



Black women leaders...are wrestling with the categorical challenges of driving change, living our values, raising families, responding to crises, and vivifying a vision of a better world for ourselves, our communities, and our families...at the functional fore of organizations and a society that we must fundamentally transform in order to succeed.

II.

My name is Cicley Gay, and I am board chairwoman of the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation.

Since accepting my role with BLM, both my career and my life have come under new levels of public scrutiny. As a result, my character and my competency are under attack.

Intrusive? Yes. Anticipated? Also yes.

I have dedicated my career to community building, philanthropy, and social justice—and I will not allow the complexity of my experiences as a Black woman, or my individual circumstances, to be erased or maligned.

This article aims to contextualize my life and work—my choices, my failures, my learnings, my mistakes, and my successes—as I actively confront the same multiple, overlapping crises our society is facing today, and may face for the foreseeable future.

In doing so, I believe I can contribute to, elevate, and sharpen the accuracy, effectiveness, and rigor of a myriad of public conversations: conversations about fiscal responsibility, incentive alignment,³ living through an age of unprecedented moral complexity, the state of Black women in leadership, and more.

I chose the *Nonprofit Quarterly* as an initial platform for recontextualizing and unpacking my lived experiences because I believe it is a fit-for-purpose forum: one wherein I not only can address but also actively advance and reshape the critical, intersecting narratives around the movement for Black lives. I believe we can use this space to ensure that, like the arc of the moral universe, we collectively, individually, and organizationally *truly* bend toward justice.

And today I have the great fortune of joining hand, pen, and voice with other Black women leaders and co-contributors. Like me, they are wrestling with the categorical challenges of driving change, living our values, raising families, responding to crises, and vivifying a vision of a better world for ourselves, our communities, and our families—under a media microscope and at the functional fore of organizations and

a society that we must fundamentally transform in order to succeed.

My name is Cicley Gay, and this is my story.

III.

We've all seen them: news articles, blog posts, Instagram captions addressing challenges, complexity, and personal identity, led with the now-platitudinous Walt Whitman quote:

“I contain multitudes.”⁴

For this story, it's far more fitting to quote a different renowned American poet—a fellow Black woman and a multihyphenate like me: activist-mother-teacher.

...most of all

I am blessed within my selves

who are come to make our shattered faces whole.

—Audre Lorde⁵

I understood what I was signing up for when I accepted the position of board chair with BLM. I was not daunted by the challenges, nuances, and risks involved.

While the job is defined by an immense set of responsibilities, I've spent my entire life building this role and learning the capabilities and conviction to manage it with excellence.

I am indisputably, specifically qualified to excel at making the types of decisions that drive our mission and vision forward—and I am uniquely qualified to speak to the areas where conditions for Black women in nonprofit leadership must change and improve.

When my chairship was announced, my career, family, finances, and personal life were all put on full display. News outlets latched onto my past—in particular, that I have filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy: once in 2005 and again in 2016.

This spotlighting of my credit history and personal debts was part of a wider campaign aimed at delegitimizing Black Lives Matter and anyone involved in its leadership.

To this day, my fellow board members and I are still dealing with personal and professional tolls—from accusations of financial impropriety to attacks on our character, our competency, and our commitment to the cause and work of the global movement for Black lives.

We battled and ultimately won a lawsuit, even as we worked around the clock to develop infrastructure for an organization that, overnight, had received tens of millions of dollars of philanthropic donations from corporations, foundations, and individuals in the wake of our historic movement building throughout 2020.

To this day, my fellow board members and I are still dealing with personal and professional tolls—from accusations of financial impropriety to attacks on our character, our competency, and our commitment to the cause and work of the global movement for Black lives.

My online profile transformed overnight. Google searches that had previously showcased my 20-year career—much of it spent overseeing multimillion-dollar budgets and grant-making processes—now saw it buried beneath pages and pages of clickbait questioning my ability to lead. Each story asked the same fundamental question: How can a (Black) woman who has filed for bankruptcy be fiscally responsible?

IV.

There are many stories that make up the fabric of my being. I am a Black woman who was born in the Midwest and raised in the South. My parents were both teachers. By many standards, this meant that our family was far from under-resourced when I was growing up. Both of my parents had attended college, and I always expected and wanted to pursue a postsecondary education as well. I also realized the expansiveness of professional possibilities I had in front of me—so different from those of my mother's generation, when women had less than a handful of available career and collegiate tracks to pursue. I was driven to identify career paths that would allow me to integrate my passions and my strengths, and I was acutely attentive to ideas, opportunities, and people that/who supported and uplifted that alignment.

I also, at sixteen years old, became a mother.

And while society immediately tried to put a cap on my potential, I doggedly sought out ways to apply the intelligence and inquisitiveness I knew truly defined me.

I first found a way to marry my personal and professional values through two years of national service as an AmeriCorps member. I recognized the unique benefits of national service for someone in my position, and applied the Corps service awards toward college tuition, ultimately receiving dual degrees in political science and communications.

As I strove to build a life I could take pride in for myself and my sons, I discovered that I had major hurdles to clear and lessons to learn when it came to my mindset about—and my relationship to—money. My parents, both of whom worked incredibly hard in their careers, inculcated me with a reverence for education. However, their relationship to money—and mine, as a result—was shaped by ideas of scarcity. When it came to building credit and understanding personal finances, I found myself learning by doing in a predatory system. I distinctly remember, as a young college student, being wooed by credit card companies tabling in the campus quad to sign up students. Unaware of the implications and thrilled at the offer of “free” T-shirts and water bottles, I signed up for every introductory offer.

In my early career, I continued pursuing opportunities to lift up under-resourced Black communities, women, and youth. For years, I worked in programmatic and grantmaking positions across both local and national nonprofit and philanthropic organizations. I renegotiated job offers, often turning down pay increases to ensure the facility and flexibility I needed to focus on my most cherished, critical role: that of “Number-One Mom.”

Eventually, I was able to start parlaying the wealth of non-monetary resources I had amassed throughout my life and professional experiences—my intellectual capital, relationships, and work ethic—into opportunities to support more like-minded leaders and organizations as an external advisor, consultant, and, eventually, small business owner. While I learned by doing, I took the types of risks that, at least on paper, entrepreneurs are not only permitted but indeed encouraged to take. Some of these risks came with great reward; others did not bear the fruit I expected or hoped for. When they didn't, I followed the processes and rules of our financial system. Over time, I learned about myself, about

monetary and nonmonetary value, and about how I could reshape my relationship to both.

Along the way, I hit hurdles. I, like more than 40 million other Americans, struggled with the burden of high-interest student loan debts that disproportionately affected my household solvency.⁶ (Half of my debt at the time was nondischargeable student loans.) And when this burden threatened to overwhelm my family—at one point in my young life, I played the role of “breadwinner” for seven family members—I chose to use a mechanism in our American financial system that was created to incentivize entrepreneurship, business building, and risk tolerance.

Am I ashamed?

At first, I was. When I initially confronted and endeavored to learn about the appropriateness and implications of filing for bankruptcy, I had no option but to move through both the educational and emotional journeys that go with the territory of making such a longitudinally and reputationally impactful choice. Nearly half of the debt I held in the 2016 filing was \$55,000 of nondischargeable student loan debt, and I needed relief to ensure I had the means to care for my family. I felt fear, guilt, loss, and—yes—shame.

Today, however, my shame around this decision is gone. Today, I recognize that there is incredible value in speaking to my experience: to improve and increase financial literacy around the history of our nation’s economic development philosophies, around the tools that exist within our present-day monetary system, and around the complexity of our tax codes for both the average American as well as my close community members.

And as I built a career, family, and life of my own, I learned to redefine my relationship to money as one of abundance, not scarcity. I began growing my village and assembling resources that continue to sustain me and my family. I maintained the curiosity and thirst for knowledge that helped me to transcend my early-career circumstances, gained connections and mentorship, and grew my resources. I planted seeds that continue to contribute to my and my family’s ability to thrive. People who were not my blood relatives, who saw potential and promise in me, further invested in me and gave me opportunities that I, in turn, planted and nurtured and began to see grow. I met and maintained relationships with multiple people—and Black women in particular—who taught me to value myself and my work more, and better, and to not settle

for less. Even today, I am growing, and season after season I am realizing a growing yield from the fruits of their care and generosity and kindness. And like Black women before and all around me, I use the surplus from these collective harvests to reinvest in those around me, in communities and individuals in need.

V.

Over my career, I have managed the budgets of multimillion-dollar nonprofit organizations, *impeccably*. I have overseen grantmaking processes that distributed resources to hundreds of deserving community-based organizations that might have been overlooked by traditional philanthropy if I had not stood in the gap to make their critical work visible. My life’s work has been committed to demonstrating the true definition of philanthropy: the love of humankind.

I have also raised three incredible young Black men, each of whom is thriving in his young adulthood, differently prepared for an ever-changing society and workforce where their safety and value remain a concern that I fight for on and off the clock.

It is an honor to wake up every morning and devote my days to the important, values-aligned work that I am called to. It is a privilege to fight for Black communities and families, mothers and children. And while I cannot imagine living out my life any other way, I am not only imagining but also actively building toward a future where my work is uplifted and valued—more than ever before, more than many of my ancestors ever thought possible.

In my life up until now and in my leadership role within BLM, I return often to Audre Lorde. And while I acknowledge and appreciate how and why organizing communities and fellow movement builders field and pay attention to critiques of over-citation or misrepresentation of Lorde’s work, I find no fault in experiencing a deep resonance with her body of writing. The shape of this article, in particular, cleaves close to many of the essays, poems, and speeches she shared with us—works that keep us connected to her and our collective presence and power. As I look toward, and prepare myself for, the future, I recognize it as one to which I must commit myself, over again and anew, to maintaining an active orientation toward a conversation about my personal choices and my life that extends beyond and is greater than me—because I have accepted and chosen a life and work that are far greater than the sum of their parts. And while I lean into this calling, I hope and pray for the kind of personal and

societal discernment Lorde once articulated as being fundamental to our success at both bringing about true social justice and living into the fullness of our lives: “The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives.”⁷

There is so much more to unpack here: around the prevalence of predatory lending throughout the history of our nation, its persistence and compounded network effects in digitally driven twenty-first-century marketplaces, and the havoc it has wreaked (and continues to wreak) on historically marginalized and vulnerable communities—in particular, low-income communities of color.

There is so much more to say: about combating exploitative corporations and practices—even while prejudicial patterns are actively perpetuated, even while elected officials prioritize individual advancement and self-preservation over the

passage of reparative policies and over the undoing of historic wrongs.

There is so much more to share: about the onus of agency, both individual and shared, for communities, elders, families, parents, and teachers who face barriers to educational access and equity. About how our circumstances—chosen or not, conscious or not—affect and create our foundational relationships to the cornerstones of legacy, life, and love: health and wealth.

But for now, for today: I hope these small details from my life story serve as a beginning. That they can be grounding. That they create or widen an opening for a necessarily larger scale, longer set of conversations. And that they represent a coming together around a shared vision of joy, power, victory, and love.⁸

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Fighting to Be Wealthy and Well

by JaNay Queen Nazaire

I am determined to be a good ancestor. As my ancestors fought through their own “sick and tired,” I will continue to push through mine, working for change and trusting the next generation to pick up the torch and carry on until we reach the mountaintop, where we can all be wealthy and well.



I am sick and tired of being sick and tired.⁷¹ Civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer said those words in 1964, and they are just as true for Black women today as they were then. The context has changed, but the situation remains the same.

This is especially true for the women, like me, who are relentlessly pushing for all people to be wealthy and well while too often sacrificing their own wellbeing. We operate in a system that does not want us to succeed. Our economic system was repeatedly designed to keep Black people out. Any time progress has been made, it has been limited, because those working to improve the system have not wanted Black people to benefit.

When the labor movement started to organize, the establishment asked, *How can we keep the Negroes out?* When Social Security helped reduce poverty, the establishment asked, *How can we keep the Negroes out?* When the country began to invest in the middle class through the GI Bill, the establishment asked, *How can we keep the Negroes out?* When Black people started to move North for safety, they asked, *How can we keep the Negroes out?* When women got the right to vote, they asked, *How can we keep the Negro women out?*

I am a “Negro woman” and the cofounder and CEO of Blk Grvty, an organization designed to make it normal for women, Black people, and Indigenous people worldwide to be wealthy and well. Blk Grvty develops pilots for financial models,



When we achieve systemic inclusion, there will be a paradigm shift for humanity. People will be healthy. Families will thrive. Communities will be strong. The economy will be resilient. The planet will be fertile. And instead of being “sick and tired,” I—along with countless other Black women—will be well and rested.

products, and services that can be adopted by the economic marketplace at scale. We advise public, private, and philanthropic leaders to influence how, when, and to whom capital flows, aiming to change institutions and systems so that they are inclusive by default. When we achieve systemic inclusion, there will be a paradigm shift for humanity. People will be healthy. Families will thrive. Communities will be strong. The economy will be resilient. The planet will be fertile. And instead of being “sick and tired,” I—along with countless other Black women—will be well and rested.

THE POWER OF CAPITAL

For more than 20 years, I have worked with government, philanthropy, and community-based institutions to get better outcomes for people in education, health, housing, workforce development, small business, and more. Using frameworks like Results-Based Accountability² and Collective Impact,³ but with an antiracist and community-centered analysis, I have helped hundreds of communities map out their vision, strategic partnerships, and data-driven plans—all in an effort to acquire the tools and resources necessary to achieve their desired results. While I observed some progress, it was often incremental change rather than change at scale.

I conducted a root-cause analysis of my work, asking *why?* as many times as possible to figure out what was leading to limited change. In this analysis, one thing became abundantly clear: there was a lack of significant capital being invested into the communities in which I was working to change conditions for people and see better outcomes across systems.

In my own journey, I’ve come to appreciate the power of capital in ways I hadn’t early on in my life and work. Being acutely aware of how Black minds and bodies were used as

assets to generate trillions in wealth for others with little to show for it in terms of our own wealth, I saw capitalism as purely extractive and leaving countless bodies in its wake. While this remains true, I have had to reckon with how participating in the capital market can close gaps and generate new wealth.

This approach became even more real when I worked with an investor who had a growth mindset. I witnessed \$50 million become \$350 million and \$350 million become \$1 billion.

Working with venture capitalists, private equity investors, and impact investment funds, I’ve watched how an infusion of capital and effective operational support can stabilize, strengthen, and grow a business, ultimately producing resources that benefit everyone involved—including, by extension, their families and communities. These events are life-changing, as they create economic security and a path to wealth and wellbeing.

So I ask: Why not take the same approach to close the racial wealth gap? Imagine an infusion of capital for Black people simply to provide the tools and resources necessary for us to participate as real competitors in the capital marketplace. *Everyone* would benefit, because the system would be designed to *include* us. With free rein and our full participation, witness the power of Black people unleashed in freedom. Everyone could enjoy the benefits of our creativity and genius...but this time, we would reap the rewards.

Yet this idea, my friend, is terrifying for too many...and this is why I remain exhausted. I will persist, however, because I see a world in which we have wealth and wellbeing for everyone to enjoy. I see a world where we are not focused on GDP but rather on a regenerative economy—one in which everyone has enough to be well, evidenced by the health of people, wildlife, and our planet.

CAPITAL BATTLES

I agree with Sarwat Jahan and Ahmed Saber Mahmud’s assessment that we must “take appropriate steps to protect the free market from powerful private interests that seek to impede its efficient functioning. The concentration of ownership of productive assets must be limited to ensure competition.”⁴ Essentially, “save capitalism from the capitalists.”⁵ When we create loopholes to exclude, it taints the system, allowing for exploitation and corruption—which is what we continue to experience in our economy.

I feel pulled apart each day, trying to push a door open for the amazing Black people who deserve it while also having to continuously defend myself for even trying to bring wealth and wellbeing to everyone.

The point is, not only are resources available, but principles for investing for scale are also on the ready and being used as core operating practices in business. If we apply these principles to our social systems, I guarantee we will see more than incremental change. Unfortunately, we are conditioned to support *programs* in the social sector. That means the level of investment necessary for change at scale remains out of reach.⁶ I wonder if people even believe it's possible to live in a world in which people are healthy, productive, conscientious of our impact on the planet, and economically secure instead of mindlessly participating, mimicking behaviors that purport to get the job done?⁷ I believe it is possible.

As I've come to understand how to leverage capital for better outcomes, I've found myself tiptoeing in some spaces for fear of reprisal from those who rail against capitalism. Let's be clear: money alone does not solve everything; but it is the currency we have for existing in our current economy—and without proper financial investment, in the long run, our work will be in vain. It is why Ms. Hamer's words resonate so strongly 60 years later. I am for economic justice, but it requires more than the 5 percent tranche that philanthropy is legally obligated to pay out annually to address the large-scale social problems driven by business decisions.⁸ (And note that the amount hasn't changed since the tranche was first established, in 1969. Fifty-five years later, our problems have become more expensive.⁹) These dollars are important, but they should be used as *leverage* to attract larger dollars and government support to take systems change strategies to scale.

So the battle continues, on all sides. Not just what you would expect—resistance from those who want to amass and concentrate wealth among an elite few—but also from my colleagues who have committed to fight for racial and economic justice alongside me. They, too, get stuck drawing hard lines and operating in binaries (pro or anti, right or wrong, black or white), when a more open approach (both/and, multiple truths, and gray) might be a better choice for advancing their agenda. I feel pulled apart each day, trying to push a door open for the amazing Black people who deserve it while also having to continuously defend myself for even trying to bring wealth and wellbeing to everyone.

There are three fronts on which I find myself constantly battling: (1) extractive capitalists, (2) poverty brokers, and (3) not-so-impactful impact investors.

The extractive capitalists

On more occasions than I can count, I've sat across from someone who says with pride and a hint of defensiveness: "I'm a capitalist." Without acknowledging how the system is exploited to benefit some and disadvantage others, it is challenging for me to engage in a real conversation about capitalism. A core principle of capitalism is achieving the most profit possible by making the "best" use of an available resource or product. The problem is in how the "best use" is defined, as greedy humans focus on making the *most* profit possible rather than the *highest* profit possible.

For example, the *highest* use of Earth is to allow it to produce clean air, clean water, and the minerals necessary for healthy life—but by focusing on the *most* profit, we are destroying our environment, extracting from it, and creating hazardous environments and uninhabitable living conditions. Someone is certainly making a profit—but the rest of us are suffering.

This is bad behavior, full stop. It is an extraction of resources and an exploitation of a system, *and it is counter to facilitating the best and highest use of a rich resource*. What's worse is that we all know and feel it, but we allow ourselves to remain complicit in perpetuating such exploitation. Why not use Earth's resources to cultivate a healthy, fruitful, vibrant environment in which all beings can thrive? That world is absolutely possible!

We can reset how capitalism is operationalized. A great place to start is in the asset-management industry, where there are \$82.24 trillion in assets under management (AUM) available.¹⁰ Right now, almost 99 percent of asset managers are White men,¹¹ and because people invest in those who look like them, that means most capital is flowing away from communities of color and back into White—and wealthy—communities.¹² We need more Black and other New Majority people to be investors, with power to direct how money flows, ultimately influencing business growth, job creation,

I have seen similar dynamics with impact investors. They want to help Black people; they do not want to invest in Black people as a valued asset.

community investment, and government policy. So many studies demonstrate that diverse teams get strong returns, and it only makes sense to have a more representative group of managers making non-extractive investment decisions for an increasingly diverse populace. Still, I witness fund managers getting fewer dollars to invest in/with Black and Latinx women, who are suffering the most.¹³ (The data I used in my research did not account for Indigenous women—a substantive gap.)

The poverty brokers

These are the people who fight for racial economic justice while collecting their checks from nonprofits, philanthropy, and government—institutions underwritten by historically extractive capitalism. They rail against capitalism without a real analysis of what it is and what it can be. They're also comfortable focusing on solving for poverty, which is insufficient if we want to bring wealth and wellbeing to everyone. Even if we bring everyone above the federal poverty limit, we will still have a vastly unequal and inequitable society.

While many poverty brokers work in nonprofit, philanthropy, and activist spaces and agree with the need to close the racial wealth gap (as the average White family has about seven times the wealth of the average Black family¹⁴), they are not willing to do what it takes to actually achieve this. *Building wealth* requires a different mindset and approach than *solving for poverty*. Although both strategies are necessary, they are not the same.

I have worked to design strategies to support fund managers of color, only to be asked why I am trying to help rich people over poor people. If we are not helping out the most vulnerable, they think, there's no point in helping at all. They do not see that intervening in the mechanisms of capitalism will eventually help everyone—that supporting fund managers of color is not about the people but, rather, the system.

I do sympathize with the poverty brokers in the sense that whatever solutions are designed need to incorporate strategies that keep people from being poor. I do wish our system

was different. But it is not, and it will not change anytime soon. Designing different programs to service different needs will not get us to the place where we can close racial wealth gaps or reduce income inequality. If we want to truly change things, we must harness our economic engine to produce different results.

The not-so-impactful impact investors

Impact-first funders should be a natural ally—and most of the time, they are; but many of them operate with a programmatic mindset similar to the poverty brokers. Even worse, like the extractive capitalists, they cannot imagine a world where Black people are wealthy. Many, if not most, operate with a deficit mindset that sees problems to be solved rather than solutions in which to be invested.

Research from Illumen Capital and Stanford University looked at real-life investment decision-making and found something surprising: after asset allocators reviewed high-performing teams led by Black men, they reported lower status scores on a social status test.¹⁵ Basically, the allocators felt threatened by the competency of these Black people.

In contrast, when reviewing low-performing teams led by Black men, the allocators preferred those teams over teams led by White men with similar performance.¹⁶ They were rooting for those Black people, even if they did not want to invest in them. In other words, they were more comfortable with low-performing Black people because that reinforced their assumptions about themselves as the superior and more deserving group.

I have seen similar dynamics with impact investors. They want to help Black people; they do not want to invest in Black people as a valued asset. This keeps the status quo in place, with Black people on the bottom, seemingly needing a handout, rather than dismantling the mechanisms that keep us down to begin with.

TRUE WEALTH

All hope is not lost, however, as extremely wealthy people are making bold moves. MacKenzie Scott and Melinda Gates, for example, are directionally right. *Keep doing it. Keep giving money away.* We have to take a growth equity approach. Provide the capital to cover the gap from generations of loss and extraction. Provide the operational support to ensure the participants have the tools to be successful, *and release the need to be arbiters of the game.* *Wealthy and well* are an

array—they manifest differently for different people. And this array shouldn't be prevented by elitist, extractive capitalism.

Many people, especially those without the expertise and understanding of capital flows, hear my arguments and think that I am whitewashing the issues or repackaging the age-old advice of "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps." Many question my motivations and think that I am just trying to make myself and my friends rich. I do want to be wealthy and well. *I want to live in a world where we are not driven by fear and scarcity but rather hope, abundance, and deep reverence for a rich Earth that allows us to evolve, grow, innovate, create, invest—and repeat.* We will not all become millionaires, but we *can* all have wellness and security—which is why I fight on these three battlefronts each and every day.

I am determined to be a good ancestor. As my ancestors fought through their own "sick and tired," I will continue to push through mine, working for change and trusting the next generation to pick up the torch and carry on until we reach the mountaintop, where we can all be wealthy and well.

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7. Many of us are complicit in maintaining the system as it is designed—so we create programs or marketing campaigns to push for change but we don't change our behaviors or beliefs. We are not organizing enough people to reject the rules of the game and create new ones. Much of this is due in part to our being stuck: we have to feed our families, pay our rent, cover health bills—hustle, grind, repeat. When we prioritized individualism, we got ourselves caught in a vicious cycle, stuck running in place and making little to no progress—and we've psyched ourselves into believing that what we are doing is right, is hard work the American way (bootstrapping) and that it will all work out if only we work, run, grind a little harder. Gaslighting is a core American principle that we need to reckon with—Thomas Jefferson and friends fighting for and proclaiming freedom while exploiting and enslaving innocent people for free labor, and doing so violently. It is the language of our pledge of allegiance and national anthem juxtaposed against measurable disparities that are dictated by a caste system (see Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*). It is the request for mostly nonprofit organizations to demonstrate systems change at scale in 18 months or less with limited infrastructure and few dollars to get the job done.
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Cocreating Conditions for Trust and Change: An Opportunity for Black Women Leaders

by Keecha Harris

I have become loud, proud, and more authentic about addressing and resolving the systemic, cultural, and societal trauma of institutional racism in philanthropy....

It is, simply, good industrial hygiene—and it will be part of the dynamics of how every decision is made, and what leadership looks like, in this next generation.

W

hen I was introduced to organizational philanthropy early in my career through a large and influential foundation, I liked what I saw: flowing money to do good. But I quickly grew disillusioned with what I found to be a normalized point of view that presumed Black leaders, Indigenous leaders, and other leaders of color as insufficient without the White gaze.¹

The data are clear: those who were trusted to make decisions (and those whom the nonprofits most generously funded) reflect the majority-White foundation leadership. In fact, our own InDEEP initiative—a professional development series for foundation staff committed to racial equity and social justice—calculated a whopping \$2.7 billion funding gap between White-led and Black, Indigenous, and other people of color-led conservation organizations between 2014 and 2018.²

What was I to do? Philanthropy seemed like a difficult place for a Black woman to advance institutional racial equity. I had already launched my firm in 1999, so I followed my curiosities as an outside contributor. Over the past 25 years, we've worked with scores of foundations representing over \$300 billion in assets, with a North Star of reallocating money, power, and influence to the groundswell of brilliant, tenacious, and compassionate leaders of color.

In those early years, I engaged with potential clients covertly, because race work was not seen as “serious.” In addition, if you were a Black woman leading racial equity transformation, you were seen as being deeply self-interested (at best). Over time, however, I have become loud, proud, and more authentic about addressing



Instead of our organizations or clients making progress at the cost of our own mental health and wellbeing, we can require clear standards and filters for who we're willing to work with and what ways we're going to work with them.

and resolving the systemic, cultural, and societal trauma of institutional racism in philanthropy. This is part of being 21st-century anchored. It is, simply, good industrial hygiene—and it will be part of the dynamics of how every decision is made, and what leadership looks like, in this next generation: our population is not projected to get any less diverse.

And in recent years, it did seem like philanthropy was finally ready to “put its money where its mouth is” where racial equity was concerned. Our team helped to deploy over \$300 million in funding during the summer of 2020, when we were brought in to inform decision-making as philanthropy reacted to the racial reckoning in our country. But four years later, many of those actions have proven to be symbolic, declining, and insufficient.³ Where did the money go? Moreover, why have so many organizations not fulfilled their commitments?⁴ Corporations aren't required to report out on their fund disbursement, and there's no entity holding organizations responsible to fulfill their pledges. Some foundations' commitments to racial equity ebb and flow with the stock market.⁵ When it comes down to racial equity, many of these institutions' actions say: *Here. Take this money and move along. We don't want to be bothered with the internal work it takes to become a different organization.*

For Black women leaders and those of us deeply committed to racial equity, it can be frustrating to see that what felt like long-overdue *true* support was actually performative, or at least not nearly strong enough to turn the tide. However, this moment is bringing out the true allies and partners willing to cede power toward efforts led by Black women. Instead of participating in “fakequity,”⁶ people with genuine intention, curiosity, and willingness to look inward are showing up for a world that can't “unsee” what 2020 unveiled.

This creates a unique opportunity for Black women leaders caught in the midst of organizational philanthropy's slow but inevitable reckoning. We can capitalize on this moment to build authentic partnerships, level-set relationships, and practice expansive leadership to hardwire change for generations to come. Instead of our organizations or clients

making progress at the cost of our own mental health and wellbeing, we can require clear standards and filters for who we're willing to work with and what ways we're going to work with them. *And we don't need to work with everybody.* There are plenty of people who are willing to meet us in our humanity. Expansive leadership is defined by brave relationship building while setting community agreements to cocreate the conditions that thread the needle of trust. It is about figuring out how to move together—frailties, flaws, and all—to courageously create change.

BUILDING AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS BY PUTTING RELATIONSHIP BEFORE TASK

In the philanthropic world, funders are in the position of holding all the cards when working with partners, grantees, and consultants. When those partners are Black women, intersectional racial and gender biases create further unbalanced working environments. Even groups with a mission orientation for progress and sincere intention struggle to amplify Black women's voices. Racial equity transformation requires deep humility and a bottomless willingness to be okay with *not knowing what we don't know.*

Because we work with executives and decision-makers directing large pools of resources, my associates and I often encounter highly inequitable power dynamics. Putting relationship before task⁷ (a principle I learned from Michael Bell at InPartnership Consulting) has been the only way I've been able to effect real change as a Black woman leader. Building trust and relational connective tissue—especially in relationships tilted in power—creates the alchemy required to soar into a just future.

For example, we were up for a contract renewal with a large environmental foundation just as the lead executive, a White man, was heading on a three-month sabbatical. The foundation staff figured he was going to lose steam on racial equity initiatives when he returned, and move on to the next “shiny thing.” His staff were just going through the motions; they needed to see that their leader was serious about racial equity. Without him in the room, they started to hedge their bets.

The work of undoing oppressions within institutional philanthropy is hard. Doing it as a Black woman leader is even harder.

After returning from his sabbatical, he had more spaciousness to him. I witnessed a renewed commitment to work through his own “stuff.” It started when he communicated to me that he was perplexed about how his staff had shown up in a meeting and that he didn’t think they would change. I told him, “Racism is when you have the power to change things that could benefit people of color and you *choose not to do so*. When are you going to do something different?” He paused, looked at me, and said, “I’ve never heard it defined that way.” We reflected on this conversation a few months later, and he asked, “Why didn’t you say something to me earlier about how I was showing up?” I responded that if I had, he would have fired us as consultants. He said, “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

That’s the nature of this work. It was a gamble to show up that bluntly. However, we had built enough trust and relationship capital through solid performance to tell the truth. You want to put relationship *before* task, but it can’t be *instead of* task.

Since that conversation, that foundation’s giving profile has shifted from less than 10 percent of its funds going to Black and other people of color–led organizations to making racial equity a priority—with certain programs’ grants going to upward of 80 percent organizations led by Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color.⁸

It may take relationship building for months or years to create progress; but “going slow to go fast” is worth it. Actively socializing each others’ humanity to create belonging is what supports bridging the gap between intention and impact, leading to concrete action steps forward. The actual measurable differences of change may be smaller and slower than we’d like,⁹ but they are moving. And *change moves at the speed of trust*.¹⁰

FURTHER LEVEL-SETTING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

Because change requires a foundation of trust, discussions around community agreements help level-set and guide our relationships to enhance the strategic value for all. Community agreements are consensus statements on what every

person in a group needs from one another and commits to one another in order to feel safe, supported, open, productive, and trusting. These agreements allow us to do our best work, achieve our common vision, and serve our stakeholders well. Tactical agreements include processes for getting work done; operational agreements identify procedures or structures we all agree to use; and relational agreements are about how we want to be in relationship with one another.

We first developed community agreements when we realized that we had very different ideas about racial equity and justice than a foundation client did, which was resulting in unmet expectations for the client and the organization. Once we understood that the tactical and operational parts of the work required more checking of biases and assumptions than the work plan permitted, we developed relational agreements to show up differently and acknowledge the power dynamics at play.¹¹ These include, for example, taking the time to understand each party’s expectations, needs, assumptions, and values for a healthy working relationship. Relational agreements name the responsibility of asserting healthy boundaries, because a “no” should not harm the relationship. They take into account the deep difficulty of undoing oppressions, and they put in writing the need to give one another grace, because we will all fail at some point.

The work of undoing oppressions within institutional philanthropy is hard. Doing it as a Black woman leader is even harder. Community and relational agreements offer relief in moments of difficulty: they explicitly acknowledge power differentials and create space for each person to be seen as an equal. They also help us learn to discern the differences between being *unsafe* and being *uncomfortable*, so that we can continue the relationship and change process without shutting down or leaving anybody behind. (Knowing the difference between a psychological or emotional threat versus a growth edge is critical in a change process.)

PRACTICING EXPANSIVE LEADERSHIP FOR PRACTICING THE FUTURE

Expansive leadership requires the embodiment of our values and vulnerably living into a future we do not yet have. It includes using conflict as a generative tool when we gather,

What's your stage? Who are your partners? What are your values? What is the future you're living into? It takes all of us—people working at the grassroots, grasstops, treetops, and intergalactically—for it all to come together.

and not leaving true partners behind. It is about cocreating the right balance between challenging each other and propelling each other into a more just future. You can't get lift unless you have friction (as we saw in the earlier story with the foundation executive). People leading foundations, nonprofits, and other mission-driven groups are expected to have all the answers. Being able to express vulnerability is neither where nor why executives are called to take the helm; however, this is exactly where we have to be in change management processes for transformation to occur, and it is where the expansive leadership skills of gathering, facilitating, and convening come in.

Externally, we had formed our InDEEP initiative, engaging environmental foundation program staff in integrating racial equity and social justice throughout their grantmaking.¹² That program had been powerful in amplifying the voices of Black, Indigenous, and other foundation staff of color in conservation, fostering connection between like-hearted funders, and imagining new approaches to equitable grantmaking. But we had reached a crucial juncture: we needed foundation presidents on board to hardwire change. With founding support from Larry Kramer, past president of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, we initiated the Presidents' Forum, which gained the attention and support of more than 65 foundations with aggregate assets of \$113 billion.¹³ The goal of the Forum was to create a space where foundation CEOs could candidly discuss the most difficult issues and trade-offs around equity, think through these important issues with others facing the same or similar questions, and take action in accordance with their values. Engaging in candid, peer-to-peer learning opportunities and conversations among the top leadership of various foundations created courageous spaces for foundation leaders to discuss, explore, practice conflict, be honest, and build connective relational tissue around difficult issues and actions pertaining to racial equity.

As a racial equity transformation consulting firm, we practice internally what we ask our clients to do externally. Although we are a Black woman-led organization with a staff made up primarily of people of color, we too wrestle with the

challenges associated with White supremacy culture and capitalism, such as urgency, perfectionism, and competition. But our community agreements support us in level-setting relationships and, as much as possible, living our values by creating an environment where our team can finish their tasks—excellently—during the confines of the workweek, and have a fulfilling life outside of work. If a colleague is not showing up in alignment, or if someone's actions are impacting a person or project, we address it head on while knowing that we have each others' backs.

And (personally), I gather for a sisterhood practice with other Black women (who are in executive-level roles in prestigious organizations). We are a cross-ethnic group that is deeply committed to the practice of self-reflection through group connectivity. We spend time asking ourselves deliberate, pointed questions meant to get to the heart of our values: "Who are we before our titles?" "What does it mean to be a Black, ambitious, credentialed, accomplished woman?" "What can we do collectively because of our influence?" These retreats help us to understand that we're never more than a sister away. They help us as leaders and human beings to practice the future: a new collective way to really be with each other abundantly and without competition.



Building partnerships, level-setting relationships, and practicing expansive leadership as a Black woman will look different for each of us. For example, you're not likely to find me pursuing change at a march or protest. That's not where I shine. My abilities are not as resonant there. Instead, I feel most at home being in spaces with power brokers in foundations, corporations, and government. I'm good at navigating conflict and midwifing change to influence where their dollars go. Some people don't always agree with the way I get things done—but I'm clear on my stage and my values.

What's your stage? Who are your partners? What are your values? What is the future you're living into? It takes all of us—people working at the grassroots, grasstops, treetops, and intergalactically—for it all to come together.

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Threats and Opportunities:

Are Social Movements Ready for Black Women in Power?

by Nwamaka Agbo

I love strategy meetings. Collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving in a group are part of what most fulfills me in my work. So I remember entering a convening space one morning really looking forward to the conversation. More than that, I was excited to be with movement leaders whom I deeply respected and admired, and with whom I had worked before. And then, a few moments later, I was pulled aside and asked not to participate, given my role as a philanthropic leader.

I felt surprised, and also disappointed. Yet I understood the disproportionate weight my opinions now held as the CEO of a foundation. My institutional and positional power meant my voice would have an outsized impact on the group and disrupt the meeting dynamics. So I observed on the periphery, instead.

It was a moment of deep reflection for me. People I had door-knocked with and planned community events with were now people with whom I was no longer able to freely engage out of fear of misusing the power of my leadership.

Stepping into my leadership role as the CEO of Kataly was the first time I had experienced positional and institutional power from the other side—and being in this position was disorienting at first. For much of my life, I have been regarded as someone without power. People see me, a Black woman, and make assumptions about my role, my expertise, and my worth. Moving through the world as a queer Black woman is both profoundly joyful and beautiful and frustrating and infuriating. It took time to adjust to the power that I now hold and the immense responsibility that comes with that power: to create a supportive and healthy work environment for our staff, to fulfill our mission in service of our grantees, to work with my colleagues in philanthropy effectively, and so much more.



■

One of the central feelings I have experienced since stepping into a leadership role at Kataly is *isolation*.... As a philanthropic leader, [convenings] have become spaces where I need to be mindful of the weight of my words and the influence of my presence.... The movement spaces and political homes that raised me are what made it possible for me to be in the leadership role that I'm in today. I want to be back in those spaces.

■

The overt aggressions and microaggressions are bitter pills that I must constantly assess whether to swallow in order to be able to go about my day or spit out and directly confront the slights.

Living at the intersection of multiple, marginalized identities, I have experienced harm at the hands of people in power for a long time. I can sympathize and empathize with the ways in which people are triggered by power. Out of a need to protect and defend ourselves, we respond to power based on our past experiences. *But now I am beginning to understand the limitations of these defensive stances, particularly when the types of power we are engaging with are different from the traditional systems of power we've come up against for most of our lives.*

Over and over, I return to the same question: *Are social movements truly ready to engage with Black women in power?* In this essay, I explore the deep challenges Black women face in our leadership, the ways in which a desire to destroy power is holding us back from the transformative changes we want to create in our society, and how we can be in relationship with power differently.

ISOLATION, INVISIBILIZATION, AND THE EXPECTATION TO RISE ABOVE

One of the central feelings I have experienced since stepping into a leadership role at Kataly is *isolation*. The institutional privilege and power of working in philanthropy and my positional power as the CEO of a hierarchical organization mean I am no longer a peer of many of the people I have worked alongside for years across social movements.

Being in my role has meant adjusting how I engage at social movement gatherings, as was the case with the convening space where I was asked not to participate. In the past, I felt a sense of belonging at these gatherings. They were where I deepened my political analysis and formed relationships that sustained me. As a philanthropic leader, these have become spaces where I need to be mindful of the weight of my words and the influence of my presence.

I find myself feeling untethered and unanchored, largely because there are so few values-aligned spaces within philanthropy for me as a Black woman leader.

My lived experience as a Black queer woman means that I experience *misogynoir*, a specific type of prejudice weaponized against Black women based on race and gender, on a daily basis.¹ The overt aggressions and microaggressions are bitter pills that I must constantly assess whether to swallow in order to be able to go about my day or spit out and directly confront the slights—which takes significant emotional energy and time.

Many people do not recognize that they might be invisibilizing, challenging, or undermining me when we interact. The inherent challenge of being a Black woman leader with intersecting identities is that we must constantly remain vigilant and assess if the critiques we receive are legitimate based on our actions or unfounded due to anti-Blackness, sexism, or any of the other systems of oppression that shape our lives.

I contend with the expectation that I must have the capacity to rise above and lead with grace and compassion in the face of, or when engaging with, the very people who are committing microaggressions against me. As Black women, we are expected to extend care and support that are often not afforded us in return.

These are expectations that our white,² male counterparts do not have to endure. This dynamic can best be summarized as the “Magical Negress” effect. We are both not allowed to feel pain or injustices and expected to outperform others due to our identities and lived experiences. The conundrum is that our identity is the thing that makes us vulnerable to mistreatment, and yet, because of that mistreatment, we have the added pressure to be better than others who don't have to suffer through the same humiliation, undermining, and discrediting that we endure. And, we must ultimately do all of this in silence, behind closed doors, so as not to trigger the “Angry Black Woman” trope.

This is the landscape and context in which many Black women leaders are moving. Can we engage Black women leaders differently? How can we shift our relationship to power so that there is shared accountability and the space for Black women in power to belong to the communities we serve?

UNDERSTANDING POWER AND DEFENSE MECHANISMS

In order to contend with Black women's leadership and power, we must first have a comprehensive understanding of what power actually means.

When we isolate leaders and reduce them to figureheads and strip them of their humanity, we miss out on the opportunity to gain insight and intelligence from what they are learning and seeing from the new vantage point of their role.

Power is an interpersonal, intergroup, structural, and cultural dynamic that is cocreated by those who have the power and those who are impacted by that power. Power is constantly in play as people relate to one another. Our ability to have self-awareness about how our actions and use of power impact others is critical for assessing whether we are responsibly wielding our power. And those who find themselves shaped by the power and authority of others also have a choice in how they respond to the impact of the power they experience. Being able to forthrightly communicate how a leader's power is impacting you, positively or negatively, is a critical step in creating change in the leader. How the leader responds to your feedback will provide more information about *who* they are, *what* they value, and *how* they intend to lead moving forward.

How we engage with people in power and power structures is often defined by the relationships we had to power in the past. For centuries, white people in this country have held all positions of power, and the vast majority of powerful roles in our society continue to be occupied by white people. So it is only natural that we have developed particular mechanisms for contending with power that is held within the container of whiteness. Oftentimes, these mechanisms are grounded in a stance of attacking and defensiveness, out of an instinct for self-preservation. But as we contend with new systems of power and power that is held by people of color—and Black women in particular—what are we losing by constantly being in a fighting stance?

Many of us have been fighting for justice and liberation our entire lives. As fighters, we have our fists clenched, either ready to defend ourselves or ready to throw the first punch. In this fighting posture, we deny ourselves the ability to use our hands for anything else. A closed-off, defensive stance limits our capacity to identify when our movements have successfully won some positions of power that can be engaged for a collaborative, curious, and open mindset.

Many of us committed to social justice, antiracist, and liberation practices might not be aware of how we internalize the very same systems of oppression we are trying to dismantle out in the world. And this is because systems don't exist outside of us. The systems are *of* us, because systems are designed and reinforced through the daily actions of people who uphold those systems in addition to the policies and cultural practices that perpetuate them. It is through our

ability to be honest and self-aware that we can resist the internalized oppressive habits and patterns within us and make conscious choices to respond differently.

By adopting a new perspective, we can leverage newfound power to create different material outcomes for our movements and communities. If we can create spaces and identify opportunities where we can steward power with responsibility and care for those whose lives we touch, then we can begin to create a new culture of governance that forthrightly embodies accountability to our communities and care and concern for our neighbors.

STEWARDED POWER TOGETHER

Thinking about how to respond to, and build, power in a new way requires a transformative mindset shift in all of us. First, each of us has to acknowledge the connections we have to power, in one way or another, and therefore how we share in the responsibility of wielding that power. This can look like speaking up and contributing to the discourse, offering ideas and insights, and engaging in principled struggle and push-back when needed. And, when power has been exercised and put into action, we share in the responsibility of the resulting outcomes—good or bad. While the person with the most power to make the decisions should ultimately be accountable, everyone present is responsible.

When we isolate leaders and reduce them to figureheads and strip them of their humanity, we miss out on the opportunity to gain insight and intelligence from what they are learning and seeing from the new vantage point of their role. What should be regarded as a “win” when someone from our social movements moves into a leadership role ends up becoming a “loss,” because we lack the structures to steward power with them as opposed to leaving the burden on their shoulders to deal with.

Being in spaces with mixed levels of power requires us to act with authenticity, deep vulnerability, and integrity. And, as with most things, relationships are central to the process. Developing reciprocal and caring relationships is the best way to learn to steward power together. When we trust each other, we know we are safe to share our complex and flawed humanity. Trust creates the conditions for us to have humility, to change our opinion or assessment when presented with new information, and to provide reassurance of care and belonging when someone takes responsibility for their missteps.

The movement spaces and political homes that raised me are what made it possible for me to be in the leadership role that I'm in today. I want to be back in those spaces and engage in dialogue and critical thinking where all present—organizational leaders, grassroots organizers, community members, policy advocates, and policymakers—collectively share information from our respective roles so that we can form a grounded assessment about the state of our social movements, develop shared understanding about the conditions impacting our communities, and determine the next step of strategies that each of us is responsible for advancing. This is how we can begin to steward power together, in service of our North Star of justice and liberation.

When I imagine what it looks like to steward power together, I envision us being vulnerable with each other; I imagine acknowledging I've made a mistake and knowing that I will be held accountable in community rather than abandoned and punished; I imagine radical honesty, where people share their feedback with me without fear of retaliation but with investment in my growth and evolution; I imagine knowing I am respected and trusted, and responding to criticism without defensiveness.

Sometimes it is hard to believe that this vision can become a reality. I am keenly aware of how power structures that reinforce patriarchy and white supremacy have harmed me and others, yet I am inspired by the creativity and ingenuity of many of our grantee partners at Kataly—organizations like Black Organizing for Liberation and Dignity (BOLD),³ The Embodiment Institute,⁴ the Shelterwood Collective,⁵ and many others that create intentional spaces for people to come together and steward power collectively.

As frustrated and challenged as I have often felt as a Black woman in leadership, I remain hopeful. If we commit to practicing care and respect for each other with rigor and integrity, power no longer has to be only a threat—it can begin to be possibility.

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Possibility to Power: How Black Women Leaders Are Building New Futures

by Amoretta Morris

■
As Black women, we must lead while reimagining leadership and organize for tomorrow while dismantling the dehumanizing systems of today. It is, in some ways, impossible work.

■ In the aftermath of the racial justice uprisings of 2020, leaders across the nonprofit world, including the philanthropic sector, made commitments to shift power to community. This came in the form of ultimately unmet financial commitments to work led by people of color,¹ promises to revisit and interrogate internal practices, and the long-overdue ascension of more women, trans folks, and people of color to leadership roles.

I am one of those leaders.

As a Black woman in nonprofit management, the terrain beneath me has often felt rough, uncharted. When the cards have forever been stacked against you and you're visioning with expanse, it can feel like you're experiencing things alone and anew. In reality, there are deep tracks to follow. Because while Black women holding formal leadership roles is a development of recent years, Black women have been organizing philanthropy for decades. And Black women have been organizing—period—for centuries.² And what is the purest form of philanthropy, if not organizing for collective freedom and care?

THE FUTURE I AM DREAMING

“Look closely at the present you are constructing,” said Alice Walker. “It should look like the future you are dreaming.”³



Leading as a Black woman can also be a matter of life and death. In September 2023, two Black women presidents of higher education institutions died in office: Temple University President Joanne Epps and Volunteer State Community College President Dr. Orinthia Montague.

I come to this work as a queer Black woman, daughter of the South, community organizer, and spiritual truth-seeker. The world I am committed to building is one in which we all do meaningful work with respect and dignity—and get to do it as our full authentic selves. As a person with intersecting identities, this can feel like a challenge. Sometimes, it feels impossible.

Currently, I serve at the helm of Borealis Philanthropy, an intermediary that pools funding from across philanthropy and places it directly in the hands of grassroots organizers on the front lines of movements for liberation. Leading justice-oriented work has been a source of healing for me. And still, I recognize that to choose this path has meant opening the door to a certain risk and familiar grief. I have spent my career moving among the nonprofit, government, and philanthropic sectors—organizing for social change from the outside and reforming institutions from within.

The challenges of leading as a Black woman are well documented.⁴ To show up to work is to show up prepared to defend your brilliance and expertise. It is to draft budgets and strategic plans against the backdrop of unbounded violence against your people. It is to march with resolute determination toward a new future, through thick and tangled webs of White supremacist tradition. And it is to do so in the face of impossible standards, heightened critique, and profound misogyny.

Leading as a Black woman can also be a matter of life and death. In September 2023, two Black women presidents of higher education institutions died in office: Temple University President Joanne Epps and Volunteer State Community College President Dr. Orinthia Montague.⁵

The health impacts of racism, including workplace discrimination, are well researched. The added strain of navigating structural racism with its micro- and macroaggressions manifests in Black women's bodies as elevated stress, chronic anxiety, depression, fibroids, alopecia, and a myriad of other symptoms. Society brushes these under the rug that they then ask the same Black women leaders to vacuum.

As a Black woman alum of Harvard University, I remember when Claudine Gay was announced as the new president. I should have been elated; instead, my first reaction was fear. I genuinely thought, "I hope she doesn't die." I wasn't scared an assassin would fell her on Massachusetts Avenue; instead, I was afraid that the exhaustingly familiar disease of White supremacist patriarchy would be the silent killer it has always been. As we saw, it came for Dr. Gay in the form of her forced resignation from Harvard—another loss of brilliant Black female leadership.

For me, the blueprint for leadership work is *authenticity*. It is the continued practice of bringing our whole selves to our roles, ultimately transforming the ecosystems we touch. Because as Black women, our wisdom is unmatched. It is wisdom born of hope and rage, the discipline of joy, and a "why" rooted in love, resistance, and solidarity. It comes from a deeply intimate understanding of the power *and* harm of the sectors we lead. And, most important, it is filtered through the lens of radical Black feminisms, which dictate that *any true movement for liberation must center those who have been pushed to the outermost edges of this country's power structures*.⁶

To stand in this work as a Black woman is undoubtedly to face immense pressure and expectation; but it is also to be granted the privilege to shape new paradigms that will serve as the building blocks for new futures.

In the case of the philanthropic sector, paradigm-shifting work has just begun. The tireless efforts of Black women—and in particular, queer, trans, and disabled women of color—lead to new models for philanthropy that reimagine our practice as one of accompliceship,⁷ power sharing,⁸ and reparations.⁹ This revised approach to philanthropy is actively shifting swaths of our sector toward a less extractive, more participatory and joy-centered model of funding.¹⁰

This moment presents a similar opportunity to transform the practice of leadership itself. When we center Black wisdom in our approach to management, we resist White supremacist notions of impact and success. A Black feminist lens

So many of the movement partners I raise money for every day are risking their lives to do this freedom work—risking their lives to move through the world as their full and authentic trans, queer, and/or disabled Black selves. I can know that and not diminish the toll this work takes on those of us in philanthropy.

moves our organizations and sectors toward radical human resources, evolutionary governance, and pro-Black power.¹¹ We can move at the speed of trust instead of the pace of email, refrain from reacting and commit to responding.

Through this lens, leadership and management become the work of repair. And we can approach the task of social change—and one another—with a deep tenderness, begetting more tenderness until we've created a world that acknowledges our inherent worth, detached from the capitalist notions of profit and production.

As we vision these possibilities, it feels essential to acknowledge the inherent exhaustion of this work and the toll that it takes on our minds, bodies, and spirits.¹² As Black women, we must lead while reimagining leadership and organize for tomorrow while dismantling the dehumanizing systems of today. It is, in some ways, impossible work. We will fail, many times, in many ways, over the course of our organizing lifetimes; but we will make life-saving progress, still. Wellness, for this reason, is critical to sustaining our movement for liberation.



Today, I am three years into my role as the president of Borealis. I can confidently say this is the hardest job I've ever had. I have led campaigns to close youth prisons and

been charged with the task of coordinating interagency response to urban violence. I repeat: *this is the hardest job I've ever had.*

I am willing to say that while acknowledging the privileged position I occupy in philanthropy. So many of the movement partners I raise money for every day are risking their lives to do this freedom work—risking their lives to move through the world as their full and authentic trans, queer, and/or disabled Black selves. I can know that and not diminish the toll this work takes on those of us in philanthropy. This sector continues to be unforgiving toward Black women leaders. My commitment is to forgive myself—and to extend grace, compassion, and care to myself, my team, and my partners.

The people with whom we curate our lives—our friends, colleagues, and allies—are our key source of self-love, and thus our fuel in this work. My own professional triumvirate—my executive coach, my therapist, and my personal trainer—and chosen kin have made my existence in this field possible. These are the folks who ground me, fill my cup, and guide me forward toward a freedom I know will come. Because a line of trailblazers walked before me, brilliant peers walk alongside me, and a bold, brave generation will follow.

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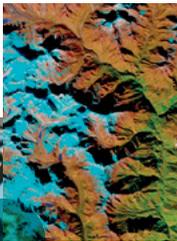
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About the Artist: Yermine Richardson



Hailing from La Romana, a bustling city in the Dominican Republic known for its thriving tourism and sugar industries, Yermine Richardson is a truly multidisciplinary artist whose stunning visual creations exude a profound celebration of Caribbean culture and aesthetics. His initial introduction to the world of art came by way of the gift shops located within the resorts where his mother was employed, and he was instantaneously captivated by the vibrant colors, themes, and techniques on display.

Richardson's artwork is deeply rooted in the traditional semiotics of Caribbean heritage, notably, womanhood, fashion, spiritualism, and cosmology, yet his influences extend far beyond his place of origin. Growing up during the 1990s, television served as his window to the wider world, and he was inspired by the kaleidoscope of pop culture references, from images of the Hubble telescope and ancient Egyptians to Mexican telenovelas, anime, fashion commercials, and music television. This eclectic mix of inspirations informs his distinct visual style, imbuing his technique with a contemporary sensibility that boldly merges tradition and identity in visually provocative ways.



Sham: An Anthology

by Shamyle Maya Dobbs

I lost myself a long time ago. I say this in a spirit of vulnerability and honesty. *I have become merely a vessel for whom and how I serve.* I am a Black woman, mother, wife, caregiver to a parent with violent dementia, nonprofit leader, writer, poet, an imaginative spirit, a wildflower, and a creative soul. As such, a traditional narrative would not do justice to the pain, joy, beauty, hope, love, fear, despair, and exhaustion that come with my everyday.

In this moment in time, I am broken and often sad.

I am on a journey figuring out what it means to be me.

When I rediscover myself, it will be important to answer the questions, *Who am I uninterrupted? How has nonprofit leadership unraveled me?*

This anthology is an homage to my fragmented spirit.

I thank NPQ for creating the space for Black Women to tell a *portion* of our story.

CHAPTER 1

There are so many things that we do to shape our whole lives around these internal messages of “you’re not good enough” and “you are unworthy.” Carrying the burden of silence, racial trauma, and shame is exhausting and soul-crushing.

—Deran Young, in *You Are Your Best Thing*¹



■
These stories are important. Our experiences matter and illuminate the need for more curated spaces for Black joy and liberation, and dedicated resources to support just that.
■

**When the organization was strong, I wasn't enough—
despite my overqualifications.
My Black leadership only became relevant—
and an option of last resort—
when the organization became insolvent and in crisis.**

My nonprofit executive leadership journey has been fraught with legitimizing my worth and value since the beginning. I ascended to the top position of my organization in an emergent transition of leadership during a financial crisis in 2017. In reaction to learning the unimaginable, and due to a lack of resources for any other option, the board asked me to step into the role of CEO of an insolvent organization.

This once strong and mission-driven nonprofit was on the brink of dissolution. Given the contributions I had made during my nine-year tenure—including serving as interim CEO—I was deserving of much more than being thrust into crisis management without compensation (I went months unpaid until I was able to raise the money for my position). Under the weight of urgency and the pressure of legitimizing my worth, I rebuilt the organization from the inside out.

This is the backdrop to my burnout and my resilience.

Imagine discovering that a 20-year-old organization has only \$5,000 in the bank, with no immediate prospects of earned or contributed revenue. Also imagine your board both being largely unaware of this insolvency and feeling ill-equipped to resolve the issue. This was the beginning of my tenure as chief program officer turned CEO during an emergency board meeting. Couple this with the fact that I had been overlooked for the position of CEO a couple of years prior, in 2014, while serving as interim CEO. Despite having the most tenure and experience to lead, I was made to feel like a token placeholder while the board searched for the permanent hire.

When the organization was strong, I wasn't enough—despite my overqualifications. My Black leadership only became relevant—and an option of last resort—when the organization became insolvent and in crisis.

Prior to the emergency transition, and in what appeared to be a gesture of good faith, my predecessor had offered me the opportunity to become CEO. She had announced her desired transition to the board, and my promotion had become part of her succession plan. The transition timeline and the weeks

leading up to her departure felt fraught with urgency and uncertainty, which led me to audit the financial position of the organization. Upon discovery of the cash position and my disclosure to the board, my predecessor was immediately asked to step down, and I was offered the official role.

There are several reasons why the organization suffered a financial crisis, some of which were outside of my predecessor's control. However, what was in her control was the courage to be forthright about the gravity of the situation and the challenges I would be inheriting. Instead, she handed me a three-pronged binder with a Wonder Woman logo on the cover, filled with various protocols and Excel documents. It was insulting and laughable. I became the Black superhero charged with fixing an organization I had not broken. When the board was on the precipice of closing the doors, I became mission control and the sole person who believed deeply in the need for the organization to continue. Unsurprisingly, my predecessor landed safely on her feet in another leadership position. The optics shielded her and the board from any culpability.

In the tumultuous days after my appointment there was a wave of White flight. Lacking any accountability and moving quickly to dissociate themselves, the executive committee stepped down quietly via email, followed by a trail of board resignations. On the morning of what was meant to be another emergency board meeting, I was left without a fully functioning board. Uncertain of the road ahead and angered at how the situation had played out, the three Black women on the board remained. Having less than a year of tenure, they stepped into the role of my executive committee and crisis management team, absent any procedural formalities.

Surrounded by palpable doubt of my capabilities, pending payroll, no foreseeable revenue, no operational reserves, and a fractured governance infrastructure, I took the helm. Several colleagues and friends (all Black women) suggested I turn down the position, saying that my years of experience—and my humanity—deserved more respect.

Holding this tension of being a dynamic, strategic thinker, visionary, and mobilizer with the unrelenting stress of leading an organization through crisis was horrific. I could not emote any feeling, let alone my fury that my leadership would be defined by this pivotal moment.

Despite their urging, I felt responsible for the livelihood of the remaining employees, the 20 years of incredible mission work at the organization, and the grassroots and community-based organizations we served. I was trapped between the internal and external pressures of being high performing and seizing what felt like my only chance to lead. Holding this tension of being a dynamic, strategic thinker, visionary, and mobilizer with the unrelenting stress of leading an organization through crisis was horrific. I could not emote any feeling, let alone my fury that my leadership would be defined by this pivotal moment. I was embarrassed that I had felt the need to say yes to the position, but comforted that I had the protection of Black women. I willingly went months without pay to ensure that my team would be compensated, and I worked diligently to eliminate the \$400,000-plus debt, all fueled by a deep-seated need to prove my worth—a *decision I would never make again, under any circumstance.*

Crisis management, organization turnaround, and cultural revitalization became my niche. Burnout and fatigue became my twisted badge of honor. I relied on Black women for my survival. I give thanks to the incredible sisterhood and partnership of Black women who stepped in to support me during that time, including but not limited to: Donna Murray-Brown; Sarida Scott; Yodit Mesfin Johnson; Allandra Bulger; Michelle Crockett; Khalilah Spencer; Lysa Davis; Tosha Tabron; and Tahirih Ziegler.

Black women support Black women.

One of those Black women leveraged her professional network to convene a meeting with all our funders, resulting in two of those black women leveraging their positional privilege in philanthropy to garner two emergency grants totaling \$125,000. This catalytic investment provided the roadmap for trusted financial support from other foundations, eliminating our debt and ensuring our cash position for years to come.

Three of those Black women became my executive committee.

Five of those Black women provided a circle of trusted confidantes.

All of them were hell-bent on watching me thrive and not allowing the circumstances that I inherited to define my leadership story. With their unwavering support and collective power, Michigan Community Resources emerged stronger and positioned as a leader in the nonprofit sector.

It is important to note that I was placed in a position to undoubtedly fail. My accountant noted that it would be a miracle to eradicate the six-figure deficit and repair the reputational harm it had created. Yet in three months, this was accomplished.

Three months. All while I was pregnant.

I rarely revel in the magnitude of that accomplishment.

There is something about writing it down and reading my own words that is a reminder of my magic.

I would be remiss if I didn't give special thanks to Alisha Butler and Ji Lee, who played an instrumental role in saving the organization. As women, thought-partners, strategic leaders, and allies at MCR, Alisha and Ji transformed our work and mission for the better.

Women support women.

CHAPTER 2

I do nothing alone. My whole life is a collaboration.

—Tricia Hersey, *The Nap Ministry's Rest Deck*²

The Transforming Solidarity Collective was born in sisterhood and a collective sense that *we are better together*. The names that follow may look familiar—**because Black and Brown women support Black and Brown women.**

The executive directors, presidents, and CEOs of Michigan Nonprofit Association; Community Development Advocates for Detroit; Michigan Community Resources; Co.act Detroit; and Nonprofit Enterprise at Work came together in 2020 at

I delivered one live birth. I delivered one stillbirth. I delivered an organization.

the urgent rallying cry of Yodit Mesfin Johnson, president and CEO of Nonprofit Enterprise at Work. This table-setting allowed for a much-needed space for the Black and Brown leadership of those organizations to come together and lament, pray, organize, plan, and hold sacred space for our humanity in the middle of a pandemic.

We found moments of rest and reprieve in that space. We shared resources and strategies for our leadership and organizational strength amid so many pandemic unknowns. The fruits of our togetherness created a framework, supported by philanthropic investment, to ensure that South-east Michigan's nonprofits—especially those from historically underresourced communities—had access to resources and services to advance their mission.

Allandra Bulger, Madhavi Reddy, Donna Murray-Brown, and Yodit Mesfin Johnson are magical and divine. The container created by this collective was a reminder of why Black and Brown women in nonprofit leadership fellowships are so important, that Black and Brown women matter, and that our voices and experiences are critical to the sector.

The table-setting allowed for the support and development of the Rest and Liberation Initiative—an initiative, as I write in the report's prologue, that is “rooted in Black joy and possibility”:

It is a liberation walk that will become a model for the sector... It is a community-building exercise that holds space for a coalition of the willing to transform work-life balance, compensation and benefits, and workplace culture in nonprofits. It is a mirror, forcing us to see the ways in which we are complicit in perpetuating cycles of exhaustion and fatigue in our sector.³

CHAPTER 3

My body is sacred. Exhaustion does not honor the sacred.

—Tricia Hersey, *The Nap Ministry's Rest Deck*⁴

Message from my OB/GYN on 11/22/2017: “Give me a call at your earliest convenience, Shamyle. We have the results from your recent ultrasound, and I would like to discuss some things with you. Thanks. Dr. Davis.”

There were two.

It was always meant to be two. But the body under pressure can destroy more than just *our* physical health.

During the financial crisis of MCR and my ascent into emergent leadership, I was pregnant with twin girls. Only one survived.

Her name is **Soleil Carolyn Maria Dobbs**. She is something special.

Her sister, Celeste Maria Dobbs, is spiritually with us in the MIGHTY spirit of my ONE. Soleil is light and love. Yet she is also fire and feistiness. She grew in my belly during one of the most stressful times of my career. I quietly grieved the loss of her sister and buried it deep in the recesses of my mind. Without missing a beat, I continued to work.

I delivered one live birth. I delivered one stillbirth. I delivered an organization.

CHAPTER 4

I am enough now.

—Tricia Hersey, *The Nap Ministry's Rest Deck*⁵

Behind the curtains of nonprofit leadership are our whole and full lives.

I am my father's keeper.

I am his guardian, conservator, caregiver, private chef, financial steward, and only family here in Michigan. I manage everything from his medical appointments down to the daily fight to bathe, eat, and take his medication. He doesn't remember me on most days, and is verbally and physically abusive. He has been put out of most medical facilities due to his violent outbursts, and I have gone through eight caregivers in 2023 alone.

My leadership lines were blurred with familial responsibilities.

I spent most of 2023 directly caring for my father, as it has been largely impossible to maintain home-care assistance. Through the graces of God and the universe conspiring to save me, I met an amazing woman who is a retired nurse with a home-care business. Tenita and her team are answers to a prayer.

Black women support Black women.

I was dying—spiritually and physically. Imagine needing rest in 2020, and moving your father in with you for 24/7 care at the brink of your exhaustion. My entire body, spirit, and soul were under siege. My marriage suffered, my children suffered, my ability to lead effectively suffered, my health suffered—and anyone who saw me saw my brokenness.

But there was a light at the end of the tunnel.

While developing the framework for the Rest and Liberation Initiative, MCR developed a sabbatical policy for staff with five-plus years tenure. I was able to leverage this newly minted policy to take 10 weeks off to care for my father.

CHAPTER 5

I will do less. Watch me thrive.

—Tricia Hersey, *The Nap Ministry's Rest Deck*⁶

At the top of January 2024, I learned that I had been selected for the Eugene Miller Fellowship, offered by the McGregor Fund. Launched in 2009 and honoring trustee emeritus Eugene Miller for his years of distinguished leadership, the program rewards outstanding, experienced leaders of McGregor-funded nonprofit organizations in Metro Detroit.

This fellowship, combined with the Rest and Liberation Initiative sabbatical, will be my long play in refining how I resist grind culture. I will find and reprioritize myself. These two opportunities, taken together, offer freedom.

Informed by my experience, the RLI is but one answer to the question of how we change the narrative for Black and Brown nonprofit leaders. This newly conceptualized sabbatical and fellowship program will provide opportunities for time away from work for leaders of small-budget nonprofit organizations predominantly staffed by and/or led by people of color. MCR worked alongside Community Development Advocates of Detroit, Co.act Detroit, and Nonprofit Enterprise at Work over the last three years to talk with our sector and understand how nonprofit leaders are feeling. The overwhelming response was that folks feel burnt out, with no end in sight.

Traditional sabbatical programs are inaccessible to leaders of small-budget organizations for a variety of reasons. We created a program that responds to the specific needs of these leaders, including up-front investment in organizational capacity to plan and prepare for the leader's temporary leave, and a direct investment in the individual leader to use in

whatever way brings them to a more restful state—including childcare, elder care, travel expenses, and the like.

The RLI also creates opportunities for nonprofit leaders and staff to access rest and time away from work outside of a sabbatical. Some leaders are unable to take three months away from work, or have not yet reached a point in their career when a sabbatical makes sense. Work-life balance and accessible time off should be the norm for leaders across the sector. Providing physical space for rest, advocating for organizational policies that allow for adequate paid time off, and leading conversations on mental health and work-life balance are examples of how the RLI aims to contribute.

The RLI also seeks to build community among sabbatical participants and leaders across the sector, in recognition that sharing experiences builds solidarity and community, and helps rally progress toward sector-wide change.

The RLI is, for me, a deeply personal response to the ways in which leaders of color aren't supported to balance work and personal life. It is a call to action for the nonprofit sector and philanthropy to think about how to rebalance these things—not just by creating a sabbatical program but also by reconsidering how we approach work culture itself, so that it can be more sustainable.

We are hopeful that the initiative and effort will garner national attention and additional support. We are actively fundraising for it.



After I studied Black women and was immersed in our history and our stories, I saw me. Like, I just saw me. I didn't see me through the lens of whiteness and the stories that are told about me and people who look like me. I saw me. I saw what I am capable of. I saw that my story started at a deficit because I was reading a narrative written by someone who created a version of me that was twisted and wrong.

—Aiko D. Bethea, in *You Are Your Best Thing*⁷

I so appreciate this platform. These stories are important. Our experiences matter and illuminate the need for more curated spaces for Black joy and liberation—and dedicated resources to support just that.

Support Black women supporting women.

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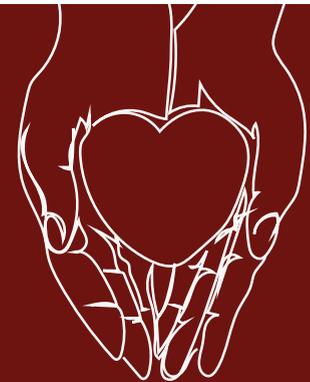
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