



# Moving the Mountain

## A Conversation about Pro-Blackness with Cyndi Suarez, Liz Derias, and Kad Smith

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“Building Black power, building pro-Black organizations, and building a pro-Black movement requires us to take a look back at the ways that power has existed for us in our communities before systems of oppression, in an effort to bring it into the current context—not only to challenge the systems of oppression but also to carry forward what has been intrinsic to our communities.”

*This conversation with Cyndi Suarez, the Nonprofit Quarterly’s president and editor in chief, and CompassPoint’s Liz Derias and Kad Smith delves into the details of the organization’s journey from white leadership to its current codirectorship model that centers pro-Blackness.*

**Liz Derias:** We thank you and NPQ for asking us to write an article about building for pro-Blackness. That’s been one of our labors of love for the last two years at CompassPoint. And getting the opportunity to write the article after we had completed one of our cohorts focusing on this very issue—and Kad and I getting to rock and roll together—felt right on time. It feels good to have gone through the process of bringing our thoughts and additional research together to this point.

**Kad Smith:** It’s definitely been a labor of love. Liz was the architect and the genius behind this writing. One of the things I’ve appreciated about Liz’s leadership at CompassPoint—and I think it’s so important that this shine through—is that it’s informed by a political analysis that doesn’t just track with somebody’s professional résumé. So, what do I mean by that? I’m talking about when somebody has a politic that informs the way they navigate the world and that emerges naturally in how they show up in terms of their professional accountabilities and responsibilities. I think that gives an organization an opportunity to understand the authenticity of why *you*, and why *you leading* at this moment. And if CompassPoint is talking about celebrating Black leadership, I think Liz has been as well-positioned as anybody could be to speak to what it looks like to come into an organizational environment and be pro-Black in one’s orientation and have a politic that’s informed by a radical Black tradition.

So, I think the piece that we wrote is a taste of that, and I'm excited to have this conversation to build on it. We are in community with leaders every day who are coming up with questions and answers around: What would it look like to truly honor the experiences of Black folks, with no asterisk? That's the multibillion-dollar—perhaps invaluable—question. As in, no conditions attached to the question of what kind of Blackness is palatable and what kind isn't.

**Cyndi Suarez:** How did CompassPoint start doing this work? Was it a question from the field that prompted it? When did the switch from critiquing white supremacist culture to a pro-Black stance happen? And how did it happen?

**LD:** I think Kad can speak to this in terms of the work that CompassPoint staff engaged with in 2015, 2016—before I came in as a staff member. But some of it was precipitated by what was going on contextually in the world, right? One of our principles at CompassPoint is to live in symbiosis with our community. So, as things are moving in the field—as things are being challenged and changed among movement organizations—we take that in and respond to that through training, curricula, content, internal development. We really try to live into one of our core strategies, which is to live liberation from the inside out and the outside in.

Our staff at that time were really moved by all the work that had been happening with Black liberation forces on the ground and all the continued responses to police violence and subsequent organizing. And they saw that as an opportunity to organize CompassPoint and not just be a center for nonprofits. We got to this place from the labor of folks who came before us over our forty-seven-year history, but it was time for a pivot—it was time to respond to our community and build alongside our community as a movement-building institution.

**CS:** So, I hear you saying it was both: it was coming from the community and it was coming internally, from staff.

**LD:** Yep.

**KS:** Yeah. I would add a little piece of honoring. Liz has already articulated what happened in response to the zeitgeist of the last few years and to what's going on in the larger community and movement work in general. But I also think it's important to acknowledge that there has been strong Black leadership at CompassPoint, even if it wasn't formally recognized. So, Spring Opara, Jasmine Hall—these are some folks who are still full-time staff members who've been truth tellers for the longest time, before it was chic, and before it was like, Oh, can you tell the truth about what's *really* going on? Can you *really* tell people about how folks are showing up, and be honest, and show up in integrity? Spring and Jasmine were folks who exuded that naturally, not as a means of, I think I'm going to be received well by my colleagues, but, This is what's important for me to feel like I belong here.

And so I don't think that can be overstated. I also don't think that we can gloss over the fact that CompassPoint went through a shared leadership transformation, and Black folks were extremely empowered by that. Like, Oh, my gosh, we can question hierarchies, we can question the way in which decision making is happening from a traditionally white-led organization? The organization eventually pivoted away from that, and Black folks weren't happy about it. I'm just gonna speak plainly: There was a sense of a commitment to holacracy and shared leadership, and the Black folks on staff were doing some of the implementation and evaluation of that work, and it increased their responsibility and created visibility around their leadership—my own included. And when the organization committed to moving away from that, that was one of the few instances that I would say CompassPoint unintentionally perpetuated anti-Blackness.

**CS:** Can you say more about that? What did you pivot to from this transitional codirectorship?

**KS:** We pivoted to a governing system with a codirectorship that's a little more loosely defined. And I'll let Liz speak to that. But essentially, we made a decision whose key momentum was coming from everybody *but* Black folks. We didn't pause and notice that Black folks were saying, "No, this is really important for us," or consider the impact on

the Black folks on staff when we made that decision. It took several years for us to even say that out loud. So, I say that because, now, when we're talking about centering Black leadership, it's also teaching us how not to replicate the mistakes of the past. And, you know, sometimes folks hear this, and they say, "Well, what about such and such groups, such and such racial identity, such and such place?" But let's start with what has happened to the Black folks on staff at *this* particular moment, and honor that if we had been more diligent and more principled in the way that we moved forward, we might have prevented a significant organizational change from having negative consequences. And let's honor our collective desire to practice shared leadership and to have leadership understood as something that's kind of fluid across the organization.

I say all that because it's not lost on me that the leaders who've been at CompassPoint before Liz came in were leading in ways that I was not—particularly regarding the ways in which Black men and women are often asked to show up in terms of emotional labor. I'm acutely aware that that's not a leadership style that I provided. Those leaders paved the way for us to see now what it means to talk about building a pro-Black organization. We can't lose sight of that. I think that Spring and Jasmine, in particular, as well as Byron Johnson, who is now at East Bay Community

Foundation, and Fela Thomas, who's at the San Francisco Foundation—a lot of these folks came in and, at a critical moment, helped piece together what pro-Black leadership and a pro-Black organization could look like, right when CompassPoint needed to have this more tangible form.

**CS:** Okay, let's get into this—because I want to get into what these things mean in more detail. I want to back up a bit and ask: What does being pro-Black mean to you? Before we get to organizations, or what a sector would look like, what does pro-Black—as a concept in and of itself—mean to you, as an individual?

**LD:** What pro-Black means to me, individually, and then also organizationally, and then more broadly in terms of the sector and the movement, is: striving to consistently build power for Black people. That is the crux for me: To be pro-Black is to build pro-Black power. And when we talk about building power at CompassPoint, we define it as building our capacity to influence or shape the outcome of our circumstances. And for us—and for me in particular—building pro-Black power is part of a longer spectrum and continuum of Black liberation movement work that preceded me and even preceded slavery and genocide and white settler colonialism.

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Building pro-Black power, I think, is taking a look at the ways in which power—formally and informally recognized positional power—existed, unrecognized, in our communities before systems of oppression. Looking at this not with the intent that everything needs to be carried over, not with an essentialist eye, but with an eye to ways that we have moved in the past—our traditions, our norms, our mores, or ways of being—that can inform the ways that we move now. And had it not been necessarily “interrupted,” for lack of a better word, by white settler colonialism, then our communities and our nations may have looked very different.

Building Black power, building pro-Black organizations, and building a pro-Black movement requires us to take a look back at the ways that power has existed for us in our communities before systems of oppression, in an effort to bring it into the current context—not only to challenge the systems of oppression but also to carry forward what has been intrinsic to our communities.

**CS:** I'm almost hearing you saying, “What does power mean to Black people?”

**LD:** What does power mean to Black people? If we are not fundamentally talking about power, Cyndi, we're not building pro-Blackness. And that's a crux for us at CompassPoint. We've been spending the last few months really interrogating—and using your book, as a matter of fact, as one of our tools—what building power means for us. Because we're not interested in a cosmetic approach to building pro-Blackness. We're interested in building up the capacity for all staff—with Black people at the center—to shape and influence the outcome of what happens at CompassPoint.

**CS:** Thank you. What about you, Kad?

**KS:** I think in terms of what comes to mind with pro-Blackness, Liz said all the important things. The thing that I would continue to lift up is celebrating Black traditions and celebrating Black folks across the diaspora. Anywhere you go in the world, there are Black folks. And they all have such rich histories and ancestors whose shoulders they stand on, and descendants whose circumstances they're trying to change. There's such an abundance, and it's such a large umbrella of an identity, and there's so much to celebrate there.

One of the things we've talked about is why *not* just focus on anti-Blackness? But when you focus on anti-Blackness, you tend to wind up with an in-group, out-group thing that perpetuates anti-Blackness. And there are ways in which we internalize our own racism as Black folks. What I love about the pro-Black approach is that it encourages and motivates us to look at what's already so clear to many of us who have been entrenched in this work: that there is more than enough inspiration to let you know that Black folks and Black peoples across the diaspora have a unique offering for this particular moment in time as we come to understanding what racial reckoning and atonement for a racialized caste system in the United States looks like. But perhaps more broadly, when we start to talk about how imperialism and capitalism have wreaked havoc across the world, what Black folks across the world can teach us about no longer continuing to sit idly by and accept that as the status quo.

So, it really is about celebrating the rich tradition of Black folks across the diaspora, and doing so with pride—whereby you feel it in your belly and you feel it in your heart and you even start to get a little shaken, because you know that there's something greater than you. It's something similar to what I get from a faith-based practice. When you understand that there are people who are connected to you because of a struggle, but also because of a rich history of how you want to be in community, how you want to celebrate one another—it can be really magnetic.

**LD:** I have to say, it's so nice to hear you talk about this, Kad. And this is an example of the work we've been doing the last few years to build pro-Blackness at the organization. Kad is exemplifying being able to say things like *capitalism, imperialism, building pro-Blackness, building on our traditions and our norms*. I don't know that that was the yesteryear of CompassPoint. This is an example of your leadership and your ability to articulate all this and create space, not just for the Black staff but all staff, to bring that analysis and those experiences in.

**KS:** One interesting point is that when we asked our twenty-seven cohort participants, “What does a pro-Black organization look like to you?,” we got twenty-seven different responses.

**CS:** So, let's get into it—because that's the second question. What did you hear?

**KS:** Each one of those responses was, I would say, uniquely deserving of celebration, of recognition, and of acknowledgment regarding where it was coming from. Although we asked, “What does a pro-Black organization look like to you?,” not, “What is pro-Blackness?,” we heard: “Pro-Blackness just looks like being comfortable in my skin”; “Pro-Blackness looks like fighting for power, for justice.” But I think for me, knowing that there were twenty-seven folks who all said something different—that there wasn't some prescriptive definition that we all landed on that made it sound neat—was powerful. It felt like a space to be creative and say, “This is what it feels like for me,” and receive affirmation and resonance from folks who might not have framed it that way—to hear or be able to say, “I totally get what you're saying, what you're getting at, by lifting that up.” That was so powerful for me.

**CS:** Were there themes?

**KS:** A theme that jumped out is that Black leaders would feel supported. Another one that came up was people being able to speak truth to power. So, an honesty aspect. Often-times, we're met with a certain level of resistance when we speak about Black-specific issues. So, that is anti-Blackness rearing its head in a very petulant and kind of gross way when Black folks talk about things that are particular to Black people and are met with resistance. A lot of what was coming up in articulating the pro-Black organization is the eradication of that dynamic. So, I can speak to what it means to be a Black person even if I'm the only one. Or even if I'm one of four. I'm not going to be met with, “Wait, wait, wait. We're not anti-Black. We're not racist.” We're going to say, “Oh, let's go further there. Let's understand what's coming up for you.” I feel like that would be in lockstep with other movements toward progress.

**LD:** Something that comes back a little to your question, Cyndi, about how we got to pro-Blackness at CompassPoint, is what we discovered from engaging with and launching our pro-Black cohort. We tried on a governance model called *holacracy* that Kad was offering, and then we moved into a

vote on whether we were going to keep holacracy or not. And the Black staff voted for it, because it gave them the opportunity to step into their power without punishment. But that got voted down, resulting in a bit of a vacuum of “What do we do next?” And at that time we were hiring, so we had a plurality of Black staff for the first time in CompassPoint's forty-seven years. Kad has already mentioned some of our staff—I'll add that we also had Maisha Quint, Simone Thelemaque. So many came in and provided a plurality.

This is important to note, because what we found as we engaged with the cohort is that it's really hard to build pro-Blackness when you are the sole Black person at the organization. I mean, it's like moving a mountain. And so that plurality provided an opportunity for the Black staff to get together and really interrogate pro-Blackness internally. And as we did that, we really built unity—we built across our values. And that's when we decided that it was really important for us to resource our Black programmatic work.

So, we already had Self-Care for Black Women in Leadership, which ran four cohorts at the time, and which is primarily a program for Black women in leadership to discuss these kinds of issues. What did pro-Blackness mean to them? How do they heal? How do they build their leadership? And then we pivoted to resourcing our B.L.A.C.K. Equity Intensive, which is the program we're talking about. So, when we asked folks, “What does it mean to build a pro-Black organization?,” we had lots of different responses. Responses that varied depending on if folks were feeling like they actually have support in their organization to build pro-Blackness versus if they didn't feel like they had support, if they were the sole Black person.

And a theme that came up that helped feed our own understanding of pro-Blackness was how to build an organization where punitive action was not at the crux of everything you do as a Black person. That value—being punitive, being dominant, having power over—is a relic, a continued relic of white supremacy, of white settler colonial culture. And so we are telling ourselves that we are undoing and challenging white settler colonial culture. That means that we are intrinsically challenging punitive action. And Black folks' reality is punitive action in this world, right? We talk a lot at CompassPoint about power and policy, and how important it is for us to

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understand the rules that govern our lives. It is very important as Black people building a pro-Black organization to know the policies and the rules that govern our lives. Because historically, if we didn’t know the rules, we could be incarcerated, we could be hanged for that. And so for us, knowing the policies that govern our lives enables us to make a choice: We can decide to follow these rules, to break these rules, to create new rules—which is all that organizing really is, right?

So, as we were talking with our participants, it was really important for us to challenge the punitive value that’s embedded in our society and in our organizations. When people are afraid, when they don’t feel psychological safety, when they aren’t able to speak truth to power—what undergirds that is a fear of punishment. And to build a pro-Black organization, you have to understand power, and you have to really be committed to removing punishment as a consequence of action.

**CS:** What I’m hearing you say in essence is that you have to have more than one Black person.

**KS:** Most certainly.

**LD:** Yeah. But something that I really love about the B.L.A.C.K. Equity Intensive program is that it pulled in and recognized positional power. So, you can have a Black person who’s on staff with you but who’s still moving in ways that endorse or promote white supremacy habits. What’s more important is the commitment, the willingness, the politic that person holds and that the other people in the organization hold. So, as we were building this intensive program, it was important for us to draw in the commitment from those who have positional power, administrative power, executive power to support the staff. That itself is a shift, as well. It’s not just having a Black person advocate pro-Blackness or challenge anti-Blackness—it’s shifting your whole governance, your whole structure, to make space for that person. And so we require executives and administrators who are supporting their staff members to be part of this intensive to *really* be supporting their staff members to be part of this intensive.

**CS:** How did you know?

**KS:** Degrees of success. I think that’s 2.0 learning. With some organizations, that principle just shone through clearly, and they were kind of a North Star in terms of how they were rocking with one another. And there were other organizations that had more of a challenge coming to terms with that.

**CS:** The people who came into the program came from organizations where they may or may not be one of the very few Black people?

**KS:** Yeah, one of very few. Everyone had at least some positional leader. Liz brought up the Self-Care for Black Women program. I don’t think we can overstate how important that was for CompassPoint’s programming purposes in terms of centering Black people. I was in my mid-twenties when for the first time I saw CompassPoint’s training room filled with only Black folks. And that was one of the most telling moments for me—because I thought, Oh, I’m gonna stay at this organization. Now, I’m a millennial. Most of my peers

jump from organization to organization every eighteen months or so. Sometimes, even if the organization is doing right by them, they're like, "I just want something different."

At CompassPoint, I could have very easily fallen into that predicament as a millennial, but when I saw the Self-Care for Black Women programming going on, I thought, Wow, there's a *there* there. I don't mean to sound corny, but there is potential here for us to use this vehicle, or vessel, for transformation in a really profound way. That Self-Care for Black Women program that Spring, Jas, Simone, and Liz have led and helped to steward was the cutting edge—the edge leadership part of CompassPoint, so to speak. It gave us the legitimacy to say we can hold space for Black folks by Black folks, and nobody that's not Black is going to be able to call into question why we're doing it. They don't have the right.

**CS:** Say that again?

**KS:** They don't have the right! As non-Black folks, you cannot say, "Why would you make this space for Black folks?" One, we see the vital need for it across the world. But in particular, we see via testimony, via experiential reflections, how valuable that space is. I won't go into the details of that, because it's not a program I worked on, but if there is some potential opportunity for NPQ to harvest lessons from other folks—there's a lot to learn there. And we wouldn't be where we are now if we hadn't done Self-Care for Black Women. It's important to acknowledge that as the tradition that we're building on directly at CompassPoint.

**CS:** Before we move on, can you give a quick example of what is a punitive system—and what that would look like for an individual in an organization—and what would be the opposite of that?

**LD:** I'll give you an example at CompassPoint. At the core for us as we were building a pro-Black organization was experimenting with a new governance model. Holacracy was useful, but it didn't meet our needs—so, we're developing a new kind of governance model. There's nothing really new under the sun—but what it does is push us to center our values, which is something that comes beautifully from bell hooks's center-margin framework. When we think about

those most marginalized and what they value, and we make changes to bring them into the center or to expand the center, then we can have more of a liberatory organization. So, *not* doing that can be punitive. It can be really punitive by default, right? So, when I came into the organization, I observed that the majority of people who worked at the organization were women, and all the Black women at the organization were mothers.

**CS:** What role did you come in as?

**LD:** I came in as what we used to call a program or project director. Now I serve as a codirector. And so when I came in, we took a look at what it is that Black mothers value. They value the health of their children. They value time with their children. They value psychological safety for themselves, and not to have to be here and worry about their children. These are intrinsic values that are at the center for Black women. And the organization didn't offer 100 percent dependent coverage. So we had mothers, and sometimes single Black mothers, working at CompassPoint and then working at other jobs just to provide healthcare for their children.

So, in an attempt to build a pro-Black organization, we decided to flip that policy on its head. We wanted to figure out how to prioritize putting money into supporting our staff, which at the core would mean supporting Black mothers. And this year we passed a policy of 100 percent dependent coverage for all our parents. Centering Black women wound up expanding the center, because now *all* of our staff—our white staff, our IPOC staff—can get care for their children. That policy is now institutionalized. It was a really beautiful practice.

This is targeted universalism, right? You take a look at who is at the center and who is the most marginalized, and you bring the most marginalized into the center, and you do that through policy change. I'm really proud of us for doing that. Because, again, consequentially, whether it was purposefully punitive or not, we were smacking mothers on the hand—it was causing punitive action for them. They couldn't navigate through their lives as freely because they were worrying about caring for their children.

So, this is why we reject the concept of anti-Blackness, and reject diversity, equity, and inclusion. These aren't frames that we use. We love all the DEI officers and practitioners and theory that have come through CompassPoint's doors, but we reject DEI, because pro-Blackness is not about trainings or tolerance or building people's understanding of pro-Blackness—which is the crux, I think, of DEI. It actually is going beyond just challenging structures, and embedding the core values of Black people and making them central.

Building pro-Blackness and building power require much more than just defending ourselves against anti-Blackness, and much more than just asking white folks in the organization to take a training. It's really about moving the needle with respect to looking at Black people as the folks who develop our governance, as the folks who, by virtue of our values, lead the development of the systems, policies, practices, and procedures at the organization. And that challenges the punitive nature—when we center Black people, we challenge the punitive nature of organizations.

**KS:** In terms of themes that came up, a couple of folks from the cohort mentioned safety. Safety from discrimination, from undeserved consequences, from systems of oppression. There's also the self-determination piece. If we talk about self-determination in terms of, for example, that flavor of the day, *shared leadership*, we're hearing conversations around this in many pockets of folks across all different identities. What does it look like to have autonomy and agency in an organization that intrinsically depends on collaboration? What does it look like to find that balance? And there's something about Black folks consistently pushing the needle on self-determination for a group of people and for individuals, and trying to find what balance looks like there.

Also, in terms of the punitive piece, I want to speak quite frankly about that. What we're seeing right now is a mass wave of organizations—either woefully underprepared, or who think they're prepared but aren't, or who are prepared but haven't quite thought through the ways in which they're going to brace for what seismic shift does to a system—who are inviting Black folks into conversations around racial justice and racial equity and then are not happy when they're met with answers they hadn't expected. So, when I

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think about the punitive aspect, the question for me is: How do we invite authentic engagement around change and transition within our organizations, around the ways in which we develop leaders, that will not be met with retribution or some recourse that is basically backdooring folks who thought that they were participating in good faith toward the advancement of an organization?

So, if a bunch of Black folks get together and say, “Well, it is kind of racist that we’ve never had a Black executive director here.” And then it’s, “We’re not racist. Oh, no, we do racial justice work in community.” No. It can be racist *and* you can be good people; you can be anti-Black *and* you can still be great individuals. Or, “We don’t listen to our

recipients of services. And I’ve noticed an overwhelming trend that the Black folks who walk through our door in XYZ housing agency or XYZ gender-based violence organization are met with contempt and frustration.” If people are upset by the fact that folks are naming that fact, then that’s a form of punitive action that either encourages people to be a little less vocal, or conditions them to think that they’re not calling out what needs to be tended to—they’re not focusing on the “right” thing.

And that endures, right? I’ve experienced it, and I’m sure that many if not all of us who are Black folks have experienced it in some way. And I think it’s crucial to be able to create the space for folks to say, “No, that can’t continue.” If we’re actually going to do transformative work with a politic around justice, it’s not fair, nor is it impartial, to say that one set of things that we focus on is okay but another set is not. And there’s a unique pattern around what it means to be Black folks calling out the ways in which Black folks are silenced, are ridiculed, are delegitimized that, if it continues, won’t enable us to step into this work wholeheartedly and toward full effect. And that’s what I think getting away from the punitive impact looks like—it’s being able to say, “Nah, we will meet that in its authenticity—and we will act on it.”

**CS:** Well, thank you so much for explaining. That really puts a fine point on it. My last question is, What would a pro-Black sector sound, look, taste, and feel like?

**LD:** That’s a great question, and there are so many folks experimenting around this—I feel really thankful to be in the field, in the sector, right now, when we’re seeing organizations flip the dynamic of white people in power on its head. Part of what I’m seeing in the sector that’s growing this collective vision of building pro-Black organizations is white people who are executive directors, administrators, who hold senior positions, leaving their organizations and making space for Black leadership.

And I really love what you were saying, Kad. There’s this nuance of collective action when Black folks say, “We need this level of safety. We’re going to challenge the ways that we haven’t experienced pro-Blackness. We’re not going to yield our power, we’re going to *organize* our power.” And part

of that is also Black people taking the power themselves—as executive directors, as senior managers—assuming that your organization is hierarchical and/or that you have positional titles, which we do at CompassPoint.

And there are organizations that are experimenting with more distributed leadership, with flat structures, and all of that is also part of building pro-Blackness—because I think an intrinsic value for us as Black people across the diaspora and the continent is this idea of *communalism*, that we're constantly working together. It's not just the individual, it's working for the whole. But there are many organizations that come through our doors at CompassPoint, and that we see in the sector, that are still hierarchical, right? That's not a bad thing in and of itself. But building a pro-Black organization means that some white folks got to go. That's important for the sector.

What's also really important, though, is that our philanthropic partners are resourcing our work to do this. It's really important that we not be beholden to projects or initiatives that have concrete, predetermined outcomes driven by our foundation folks—that this building of pro-Blackness is actually endeavors of building capacity. So, what would it look like if our philanthropic partners resourced our sector through unrestricted funding, through general operating support, which would allow us to do the work like we've been doing at CompassPoint? Allow us to do the work of building the capacity of staff to play with this vision of pro-Blackness, to experiment with it internally, to experiment with it externally. That's really important for our sector. And we think about our philanthropic partners as part of the sector.

I think what's really important for the sector is more space for organizations to learn from one another. Over the last couple of years, we've started to see large organizations placing Black women at the helm. Greenpeace just hired their first Black codirector. Change Elemental moved into greater shared leadership, and has a four-person “hub” structure that includes two Black women. Tides Advocacy hired a Black woman CEO. So, we're starting to see there's a shift, and I would attribute that to the work of the last few years—the work of people being out in the street, of Black Lives Matter, of folks who are really trying to support the resourcing of the field.

And now that we have Black people who are taking up positional power, it's really important to support them. I think what would strengthen the sector is giving time and space for Black people in positional power to learn skills, to network, to vent, to pool resources. And that's something that's been really important for us at CompassPoint. We're starting to explore hosting one of our next iterations of Black programming, which is our Black Women Executive Directorship 101, and creating space for us to really build pro-Blackness among those who are brought in and who can promote the change—and not just have our staff, who are coordinators, associate directors, directors with no positional power, trying to move the needle around pro-Blackness. We need that buy-in from those who hold positional power.

So, we've been playing and experimenting with Black female executive directorships to really account for what's happening in the field, as there appears to be money coming into the field to support pro-Black organizations, and we need to be set up to succeed. I say *appears to be*—it's early days. But there's a beautiful report that was released a few months ago about the level of philanthropic support that's been committed, and what actually is being funded.<sup>1</sup>

**KS:** Something that comes up for me—and I always sit with this when we're gearing up for some programming—is that Black folks are not a monolithic people. There's such a range and diversity of thought among Black folks. And I don't mean to be simplistic in terms of thinking about a future where our sector has the capacity to really leverage being pro-Black or putting Black folks in positions to succeed. What I mean by that is, even if we think about the rich tradition of what it means to be a Black person navigating this country throughout the Civil Rights era, there were different schools of thought. We think about it as early as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington—there are different approaches. We think about folks who are integrationist versus Pan-Africanist. There's such a beauty to what it means to be Black folks, which needs to be understood to best position us for a way forward. None of it is *less-than* or *better-than*, in my opinion. But that's just where I sit.

All that is to say, regarding pro-Blackness for the sector at this particular moment in time, that in the next decade or

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—Kad Smith

two I would love to see nonprofit organizations that don’t just provide Band-Aid solutions but actually have a root-cause analysis and a radical approach. Angela Davis says it so poignantly: “Radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root.’” Our organizations, by design, have not been created to get at the root of problems. In fact, we’re beholden to government funding and philanthropic funding, by which they oftentimes steer us away from root causes and root-problem solutions.

So, if pro-Blackness is really going to take root in this particular sector, it means we’ll see more nonprofit organizations that are actually positioned to solve the problems we set our sights on. And I see some powerful grassroots organizers and some folks doing mutual aid efforts who are starting to show that it’s doable. How do we bring that to scale and get them the same resources that folks who have been at 501(c)3s and (c)4s for twenty, thirty, forty years have access to? That’s the real, powerful question for me. And I think that at the end of the day, someone’s got to take the risk and say, “This is a bunch of bullshit, y’all. We got folks that are positioned to do this work at a high level who are already doing it very meaningfully, who are changing people’s material conditions and giving them better chances of survival and for thriving. And they’re not 501(c)3s, they’re not 501(c)4s, they don’t fit the traditional nonprofit model.”

So, when we think about a pro-Black sector, for me it means those organizations are going to be able to address those root causes. And as somebody who’s light-skinned and has the undergraduate degree background, I shouldn’t be taken more seriously than somebody who lives in the streets of Oakland and who says, “Yo, this is what I go through being a houseless person.” That’s a bunch of fuckery. (I’m gonna use this sharp language, here.) I don’t know anything about housing. I don’t know what it’s like to be houseless. I can go get a degree tomorrow in public benefits or nonprofit governance or public administration, and then I would be positioned as some expert to solve these problems. But we position folks who are going through it in real time as if they’re less-than or their ideas aren’t as legitimate. And I just don’t think that that is a radical way forward.

So, pro-Black, to me, means that the Black folks who are in the streets, the Black folks who are in prisons, the Black


folks who have directly experienced some of the most brutal forces of oppression—that those folks’ leadership will also be celebrated by everyone. And not just Black folks—white folks, IPOC folks. That we’ll start to understand the value of that. I think that’s the ambitious goal we’ve set our sights on. And if it happens in our lifetime, we’ll be lucky. If it doesn’t, then our descendants get to keep on picking up the torch.

*That*, to me is a pro-Black sector. I want to see more houseless organizations run by people who’ve been houseless. I want to see more organizations doing transformative justice by people who’ve been in prisons, by folks who’ve been impacted directly by incarceration. That’s what I want to see. When we start to see that stuff, then I’ll say, “Okay, yeah, we’re really getting it. We’re really starting to put our money where our mouth is.”

**LD:** Kad pushed us to really think about and embed this in our program: Challenging our dependence on expertise. We are not experts because we have all these *things*, right? And we challenge that internally at CompassPoint. We’re teachers *and* learners, and we’re colearners among our participants and our staff. And I feel really proud that we’re embodying that and to hear you share it, Kad—extending more broadly vis-à-vis the sector this principle of not being so dependent on expertise but centering those folks who are most impacted, for lack of better words, and who can design and facilitate their own liberation alongside us.

**CS:** Well, thank you. I really appreciate this.

**LD:** We’re really thankful to have this space. I think it gives us more opportunity to work with our participants and our partners when we’re able to be in dialogue with NPQ to shift the paradigm.



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## Note

1. Malkia Devich Cyril et al., *Mismatched: Philanthropy’s Response to the Call for Racial Justice* (San Francisco: Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, 2021); and Anastasia Reesa Tomkin, “Philanthropic Pledges for Racial Justice Found to Be Superficial,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, October 7, 2021, [nonprofitquarterly.org/philanthropic-pledges-for-racial-justice-found-to-be-superficial/](http://nonprofitquarterly.org/philanthropic-pledges-for-racial-justice-found-to-be-superficial/).

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