

Pro-Blackness Is Aspirational

A Conversation with Cyndi Suarez and Shanelle Matthews

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In this interview, Cyndi Suarez, the Nonprofit Quarterly’s president and editor in chief, and Shanelle Matthews, communications director of the Movement for Black Lives and 2022 Nonprofit Quarterly fellow, talk about what it means to be committed to pro-Blackness in a world where “everybody’s experience of Blackness is on a spectrum.”

Cyndi Suarez: In conversation with you recently about how the spring 2022 edition of the magazine is centering on building pro-Black organizations, a comment you made piqued my interest. You said something like, “Supporting BLM is not the same as being pro-Black.” I have questions beyond that, but I wanted to start by following up on that statement. What did you mean by it?

Shanelle Matthews: Several things came up for me when you first talked about this. First, I’ve spent the last six years—on and off—communicating on behalf of the Movement for Black Lives, and I have received, on the other end of that, a lot of public commitments and declarations from people about how they support the Black Lives Matter movement—and from some of them, how they’re pro-Black. And I was asking myself—when you initially said it, and when I would get these declarations—How do they understand Blackness? What does it mean to them to be pro-Black?





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During my time with Movement for Black Lives and BLM, I have watched a lot of people’s commitment—to the Black Lives Matter movement in particular—ebb and flow. And if we look at the summer of 2020 as one very recent and salient example of the increase in support for the Movement for Black Lives—and not just for our particular movement, but for Black people in general, for whom we’re organizing every day to defend and support and celebrate—there were a lot of public commitments made in support of the movement.

This was a time when a lot of people used the phrase *racial reckoning*—when America was coming to terms with our racism, with the oppression against Black people and also other people of color. And—in particular because of Trump’s presidency—also coming to terms with sexism and the interlocking oppressions that a lot of people face.

And during that time, we saw corporations of all shapes and sizes declaring that Black Lives Matter. I had emails in my inbox and text messages claiming that Black Lives Matter. There were twenty-six million people in the streets demanding justice for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. And those are clear examples of extreme Black suffering, one of which was a visceral example that people could watch and see, and feel fear or anger or shame or guilt, and be motivated to go out into the streets, to buy a book from a Black author, to read about what it means to be antiracist, to sign a petition or give recurring donations to Black organizations—namely, large legacy organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League, but also organizations like the ACLU—and maybe to talk to their friends about going to a protest, too, and making a sign.

And I believe some data were showing that ultimately more than \$50 billion had been committed to the racial justice movement, whatever that means to people—there is a wealth of different places that get determined as representative of the racial justice movement—but almost none of this was delivered to any organizations. And that’s one example. But for all the people who bought the books, who had one-off conversations, who marched in the streets, who maybe replaced one white board member with a Black

board member—well, I don't want to diminish people's commitments and their capacity to the movement in defense of Black Lives and for racial justice, but those actions are insufficient.

In many ways, the question we have to ask ourselves is, What are we willing to give up in order to be pro-Black? When we look at 2020, we come to understand or are reminded that when there are heightened moments of crisis in the United States—when something like the murder of George Floyd happens, and it's filmed, and you can watch it and see for yourself, and you say, "Hey, this is really bad"—there's an increase in uprisings on behalf of oppressed people, allies show up to support us, and then that support wanes. There's a long history of this, particularly regarding white people supporting justice and liberation for Black people.

And also—yes, of course it's bad! But why did it take this for you to say that you will be pro-Black or to stand up for Blackness? And going out into the streets is certainly worthwhile, but much more is needed. There are many ways to raise the bar for people to take deeper, more meaningful action. Because in these protest cycles, we see the support ebb. Today, for instance, in February of 2022, support for the Black Lives Matter movement is lower than it was before George Floyd's death.

I have grace toward and empathy for people when it comes to the challenges of being pro-Black, supporting the Movement for Black Lives, and/or getting involved in eradicating anti-Blackness or racial oppression more broadly. There's a spectrum of ways in which we come to these issues that are all predicated on how we were raised, on the communities that we live in, on the values and the principles on which we were raised in terms of religious ideology, and so on.

And for some, it takes a lot of personal reflection to make those kinds of public commitments—to say, "I want to be pro-Black," or "I want to support Black movements." Because for a lot of those folks who brandish the signs and go to the protests, once they go back home, they're still feeling the pull of everything else in their lives. People want to be a part of the change, but they also have these

allegiances to the systems that allow for racism to exist. Classism, for example. I have empathy because people are often torn between those allegiances—desiring to be part of this reckoning around racial justice and anti-Black racism while also belonging to a class or caste that behaves in ways that are incongruent with pro-Black values.

CS: When you say class, do you mean economic class across race? Or do you mean particularly with respect to white folks?

SM: Yes, economic class. Undoubtedly, there is a tiny group of Black people with significant wealth who experience the world differently. And while they still face racism like the rest of us, the political outcomes of their unique experiences determine how they feel about these uprisings. So, we saw many Black people in different places on the socioeconomic spectrum participate. Still, wealthy Black people also have the privilege of surrounding themselves with people and experiences that might shrink their exposure to racial bias. And it's different for Black people with wealth than it is for white people with wealth.

CS: And when you say support for the movement is less today than it was before the death of George Floyd, what do you mean by that? How do you calculate that?

SM: Well, there's polling, for example. Pew Research and others do polls to look at how support for the Movement for Black Lives and for racial justice more broadly exists within the demographics of white people in America, and of all people living here. And part of the argument is that people often support a particular type of Blackness. So, folks are comfortable with people going out and protesting, but if things get what they feel is unwieldy, or people start to uprising in a way that is uncomfortable to them—so, folks bashing in police cars, because police have killed their family and they don't particularly care about that piece of property over the dead bodies of Black people, or the movement's demand shifting from accountability to defunding the police—then we often see people's allegiances to the movement fade.



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And I think this is one example in the context of movement building and demands around Black liberation—but generally, support for Black people is often on a spectrum. People value our culture, but if we laugh too loud, they want us to get kicked off of the bus—like that story a couple of years ago, in which some Black women on a wine tour bus were laughing loudly and were asked to leave.

I mean, if we behave in the “right” way, if our demands are *palatable* enough, if it’s a *comfortable* enough situation, then there’s plenty of support for our activities and our commitments and demands and movements. But if white people become less comfortable, or if they start feeling a little out of place as white people, and they’re being pulled in different directions, the support doesn’t last.

CS: Yeah. And we’re already seeing the backlash. I was reading an article about Florida a few weeks ago. They’ve passed a law that makes it illegal to make white folks uncomfortable.

SM: Yeah. And I think that’s a critical point to bring up, Cyndi, because right now we’re having a profound debate about the history of this country—and critical race theory is central to it. And many people have never been exposed to authentic Black culture—only to caricatures of it through media and television. And what this debate is doing by eliminating true American history from the history books in schools—eliminating Black history, cross-cultural, multi-racial history—is not allowing our students to engage in what is accurate and true about this country.

And I think that also makes people’s public commitments around social movements far less meaningful—because how can you be authentically pro-Black or support movements in defense of Black Lives if you don’t really understand what the Black experience is about?

CS: What does it mean to you to be pro-Black beyond organizations or our sector?

SM: For me, the root of this conversation is power. So, that’s being able to exist as a Black person in this country

without the gaze of whiteness or having to pretend to be somebody that one is not, in terms of one's self, one's identity, and one's self-determination in one's everyday life. At the root of what I think pro-Blackness is about is advancing policies, practices, and cultural norms that allow Black communities to be self-determined and for us to govern ourselves. To have enough economic, social, and political power to decide how, when, and where to have families. To determine where to live. To have the choices and the options to be able to make the decisions, just like everybody else—about schools, about education, about jobs, and quality of life.

There's also an element around governance. What does it mean to be able to determine how our cities exist? We are often cornered into particular places inside cities that don't give us very many options in terms of grocery stores, hospitals, schools, and other essential needs.

The other thing that is important for me to say about this is that for Black people, Blackness exists on a spectrum. There is no one "right" way to be Black—or no one way to be Black. It's a way of knowing and being that each of us lives every day determined by cultural institutions, our faiths, how we're raised, the schools we attend, and sometimes the legislative bodies that govern us. And so what I think is pro-Black and how I would like to experience the world is going to be different from you or another Black person.

CS: And what would a pro-Black organization look like?

SM: I do not know that pro-Blackness is commensurate with the traditional nonprofit infrastructure. These organizations began as proxies of power for the rich. So, we're trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. That might sound a little nihilistic. But the charity model ultimately ends up being ineffective in many ways because the people who fund us often get to determine what our agendas look like. So, how could my agenda at my organization be meaningfully pro-Black if the people who are giving us the money are deciding what the agenda is?

I would say that an organization cannot inherently be *pro* or

anti anything. It is an entity that is meant to receive resources. So, if we talk about the process for the individuals *inside* of that organization to start the profoundly transformative and hard work of becoming pro-Black, then I think it starts with the self. There is no way to enter movement and genuinely advocate for radical ideas without interrogating your allegiances to oppressive systems. So, if we're not offering political education to our staff and board to understand the complexities and history of anti-Blackness, not only in the United States but also globally—so that they can have enough context to be able to authentically make some of the political decisions and commitments that they want—then we're missing the mark.

The debate around critical race theory illustrates just how hard it is for us to educate people in America about the history of atrocities that this country has perpetrated against Black people. So, we have to make that commitment in our organizations—and not just around anti-Blackness but around all kinds of issues. For example, at Movement for Black Lives, we do political education—weekly lunch-and-learns. We learn from people inside of movements and who often but not always overlap with oppressed communities. So, there's this process of edification and also of unlearning. Unlearning what we thought we knew.

Organizations are made up of people—and in order to build a more inclusive world, those people have to identify why it's so hard for them to have a lasting commitment to advancing an agenda in defense of Black lives beyond moments of uprising. Having that honest conversation with the people closest to you is a start—and then individuals leaning into making the long transformative commitment process that ultimately leads to an organization coming to more precise terms about how to support their Black staff and defend Black lives.

But it's insufficient to say that you're pro-Black, to swap out board members, to put a Black person in an ED position without the proper support or infrastructure to help them learn what it means to grow an organization. Organizations also have to reckon with the hard truth that the nonprofit model is rooted in sympathy. And you cannot truly be



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pro-Black if you are sympathetic toward me instead of wanting to, in some instances, give away your power to me, in other instances, help me to be better without making me feel like I’m less-than.

CS: Something you’ve said that was really interesting to me was about how in movement spaces people use the tools to dismantle oppression against each other. My mind went to, *Oh, so maybe movement spaces aren’t always pro-Black either. Is that true?*

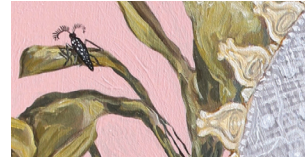
SM: No, they’re definitely not.

CS: That’s really interesting. So it’s not just organizations, it’s also movements?

SM: Oh, yes. I mean, organizations are part of movements. We must come together and identify the shared problem within the frame of social justice that is rooted in the margins, identify the solution, identify our targets—and that’s how we build power. Collectively, through these organizations. We don’t build power as individuals for oppressed people. And because the organizations are made up of people, and the movements are made up of organizations and coalitions, and everybody’s experience with Blackness is on a spectrum, it’s just a lot. Everybody has to come to the table and be willing to do the self-work, the organizational work, the coalitional work, and the broader movement work.

Movements are, simply put, groups of oppressed people who have realized that they have a shared problem and want to make change. And Blackness is not a monolith. So, our ideological differences come together in a big pot, and we spend a lot of time thinking and pontificating about how to come to shared ideals around advancing our goals.

I’ve been a part of several movements. Some movements are better with discomfort and disagreement than others. Some organizations are better prepared to have complicated conversations and for individuals to leave not feeling personally attacked but instead challenged to think through their beliefs and where they came from—to consider that maybe they have allegiances to oppressive systems



because that's what they were born into and taught when they were young, and that now those things have to be challenged and changed. But some movements and organizations are very conflict averse, internally. They do not want to engage in the hard work of dealing with shame and fear and guilt and transformation. I mean, change is not easy.

When you interrogate the self, there can end up being a lot of shame. I have heard white people articulate shame over their whiteness; people with wealth have shame about having money. I have seen people sink into guilt-ridden places and just not know how to move from there. And our movements can be inhospitable to people who are growing, who are trying to evolve. And yes, there has been a tendency to weaponize the tools that we use to dismantle the state against each other. What's often important, I think, is not people's individual public commitments or their individual actions so much as our collective actions to eradicate these terrible systems. That's how change happens—it is through all of our collective commitments that we can hold powerful people accountable and make some of these changes that, being pro-Black, we proclaim we want to make.

Being a committed member of a social movement doing the deep work over time is not easy. It requires you to transform over and over again—which means shedding layers and dealing with the shame of your old self. When I look at my old writing from college, I'm so embarrassed. It's so *respectable*, because my parents taught me to: "Pay attention." "Keep your head down." "Keep your legs closed." "You're a Black woman and you have two strikes against you, and you need to keep yourself out of trouble." And so that's what I would say: "Well, if we—Black people—just do this, and if we just do that. . . ." And I really believed in my early twenties that if we "acted right" we'd experience less harm. And so I have empathy for people when they come into movement and are still shedding layers of their old shape. People do ultimately need to reckon with themselves and do the work. But in some of these movement spaces, because of how we are raised, because of who we are in the world, the shame and the guilt and the fear and the conflict aversion keep us from engaging in the hard

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conversations. And so, no, movements are not necessarily pro-Black. There are many movements that I think would proclaim to be pro-Black, but if you dig beneath the surface, they really don't measure up.

CS: Do you have an example of that?

SM: Here's what I would say. . . . Pro-Black is an aspiration. If you look at the trajectory of the Black liberation movement throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there are some clear indications that the movement is becoming more pro-Black. One distinction between the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement of the sixties and seventies and this current iteration of the Black liberation movement is that our leadership is decentralized and queer- and women- and nonbinary-led. Some people might ask, "What does that have to do with being pro-Black?" Well, if Black people who are nonbinary, transgender, and/or women do not have power in your movements, then you cannot proclaim to be pro-Black, because you are only pro-Black for some. Even now, there are important critiques about this iteration of the Black liberation movement—and our job is to listen, repair harm, discuss, and course-correct.

There are still concerns around there not being enough Black trans leadership within our movement spaces. And it's a fair critique. We have had and will continue to have conversations around representation. And not just trans folks but also people with disabilities, and people who are undocumented, and people who are living more marginal lives and experiencing incredible suffering and oppression that we maybe don't see every day but that we know exists.

There is no pinnacle of pro-Blackness at which one will arrive. The practice is to know and remember, as Grace Lee Boggs teaches, that the political conditions around us are always changing. We are changing, and our material conditions are changing, all the time. And we have to evolve with those changes. Every single day, there are new ideas we have to contend with—and that means constantly evolving our strategies, our thinking, and our behaviors to be commensurate with those new ideas.

CS: As you talk, it reminds me of when I was in Cleveland some years ago, evaluating the Movement for Black Lives convening, and the trans issue was a really big one then. Were you there?

SM: Yeah, I was working at the press table.

CS: It was very interesting. I remember, toward the end, during one of the close-out sessions, a man came in—a Black man wearing a cowboy hat and cowboy boots. And he wouldn't let our group talk about trans issues. He just wouldn't. And I remember feeling the tension, and people having a hard time saying to him, "No, you can't stop us from talking about that." There were maybe ten of us. But he did. And I finally got up and walked over to a different group.

I also felt tension from the older folks there who were upset that they hadn't been brought in as leaders or mentors. I just felt the tension everywhere. And I thought, Wow—we're so used to having to unite against white oppression that when we have just ourselves. . . . It's almost like we haven't had decades of having those conversations, right? I feel like those are newer conversations. I'm also talking to consultants who do racial justice work, who tell me that doing the work within their communities—whether they're Southeast Asian, whether they're Latinx, whatever—is unfunded and informal. It's not what gets paid. Most people are paid to do the work vis-à-vis white folks, right? So, we all get to our marginalization in different ways—we're not all in the same space. So, I'm really intrigued by that, and by those conversations within groups and across groups of color.

And this leads me to another question: What would a pro-Black sector sound, look, taste, feel like? I'm just trying to get to the imagining that you're talking about—as you say, it's aspirational. But in terms of the sector, where people are paying some attention to this, how can we flesh it out more for people? I'm in various racial justice portfolios, oftentimes led by Black people, where the dynamic of the funder stays the same—it doesn't matter that it's all Black people in the room. So, I've been trying to dig into this question of how do we make that change people are saying we need to make, regardless of who's there?

SM: I think what's helpful about having sectors, broadly, is that this gives us a group of people—ostensibly, people who we can be challenged by and learn from—with whom we can negotiate the terms of our political and public and personal commitments around social justice. But I feel that thinking about the sector as a whole might be too broad, because even within fields there are all these different formations. The divergence among organizations' level of radicalism can be vast. For example, I worked as a narrative consultant for two groups working on food justice. One was helping people in Detroit and right outside of Detroit grow their own food and become part of a collective community of growers who can be self-sustainable. The other was a larger organization with a considerable budget preserving the charity model—where they're talking about eliminating hunger via top-down strategies. And they're having different conversations about race.

CS: Can you give me a slice of those conversations? How are they different?

SM: The conversation at the grassroots level is about the social determinants of health—such as how Black people's access or lack of access to food determines how long they live, or about how redlining eliminates Black people's access to healthy foods. There's new language for this now—"food apartheid"—reflecting how we're evolving our understanding of these massive systems that impact our lives. The other, larger organization is only just beginning to have conversations about race in relationship to hunger and food insecurity, only just starting to make the connection that your racial or ethnic background may determine how much food you have access to.

So, social justice is on a spectrum, and also people's commitment to Blackness is on a spectrum, because we enter the conversation from vastly different places. And that has a lot to do with how we grew up. If I was food insecure when I was younger, I may be much more empathetic and committed to the idea of eradicating food insecurity as an adult. But we did some polling, and there are people who just don't believe that you can go hungry in a place like the United States, even when there are tens of millions of

people—especially children—who are food insecure in this country. And by food insecure, I mean they're not just hungry for one day—they have ongoing issues with access to food. And a lot of those children are Black.

CS: What keeps you going as you do all this work—and as you move through different movements and learn and keep up with the evolution of understanding and language, which is so important? What keeps you going?

SM: Sometimes I think, What else would I be doing? We play this game, where we're like, "Okay, if you weren't working in movement, what would you be doing?" I feel like maybe I'd be an acupuncturist. Acupuncture is so helpful to me. But these issues are personal to me, Cyndi. I'm a great-great-granddaughter of sharecroppers. My Big Mama Odessa migrated from Louisiana to California, looking for more opportunities for her children. My family lived through the war on drugs, the war on poverty. I've lost family members because we don't have a national healthcare system. The mass incarceration system kept people that I love in cages. So, what keeps me going is my own personal commitment to the people I love—my accountability to my family and to my friends and to my tight community.

I keep going. I'm here. I'm committed to this for the rest of my life—one way or another. My life's work is rhetoric and narrative power building for social movements broadly and in the Black radical tradition specifically. And I love it. I love the puzzle of determining what we need to mobilize people and what will create a desire within them to be part of a broader movement for significant change that centers people experiencing the most suffering.

CS: Thank you—for all your work, for working with us at NPQ, for taking time today to speak with me, for everything. And I hope you have a great rest of your day.

SM: Thanks, Cyndi. I appreciate it.

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