

# NPO

NONPROFIT QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

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## Going Pro-Black

*What  
Would a  
Pro-Black  
Sector Sound,  
Look, Taste,  
and Feel Like?*

**Resistance and  
Radical Love:  
The Call-Forward  
of a Pro-Black  
Sector**



**Defining Pro-Black**

**Building a Pro-Black  
Organization**

**A Journey from White  
Space to Pro-Black Space**


**The Liberatory World  
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# WELCOME



Dear Readers,

At the end of 2021, NPQ convened an advisory committee on racial justice and asked the question: What is the edge of current racial justice work? The group converged around “building pro-Black organizations,” and the spring edition topic came into being.

I had several experiences around the same time that reflected a deep schism in racial justice work, depending on where one is situated. The crux of this schism is the line that divides nonprofit organizations and philanthropic ones.

One experience: While participating on a panel on media covering philanthropy, I was asked to speak on the recent controversy surrounding a large philanthropy network. Apparently, conservative philanthropists feel that the philanthropic sector is too radical, and they feel there is no room for them. This perfectly illustrates the lack of alignment between the field and the funders: No one I know has been accusing philanthropy of being radical—in fact, quite the opposite; it is being held accountable for not living up to its touted values. I said as much, and that we needed to consider what, in fact, is the purpose of philanthropy. This caused quite a stir in the audience, some of whom emailed me later to tell me what “a breath of fresh air” it had been to hear me speak what they know to be the truth. It made me wonder: Why are so many in philanthropy sitting on their truth? What are we waiting for?

Another experience: A large philanthropic network sought to partner with NPQ to work with its leading-edge funders, who are all interested in advancing racial justice. These funders hope to inspire the field with their leadership on the issue. Their main interest in partnering was in connecting with leaders of color in the field. It just so happens that NPQ has been investing in highlighting the voices of leaders of color, as they are woefully underrepresented in the sector. But the network had one caveat: that we change our language and work to not focus on leaders of color. But we are. What’s wrong with saying that?

A third experience: A large funder approached me about working with their staff on race and power. One of their key values is being bold. Yet, while the focus of the funder is to advance grassroots movements, the staff is apparently reluctant to “give up power,” and there is a “scarcity mindset.” In fact, it is not yet in conversation with grassroots movements. As one of NPQ’s staff recently said in a meeting, “Are we ever going to move past symbolic solidarity?”



We're moving beyond DEI (bodies at the table), racial equity (measuring POC against white people), and perhaps even racial justice (the righting of racial wrongs), to an actual focus on what Black people need to thrive (building pro-Black).

These parallel realities exist right now. But there is a gap between the leaders of color and radical white conspirators at the edge, and the funders who claim to be.

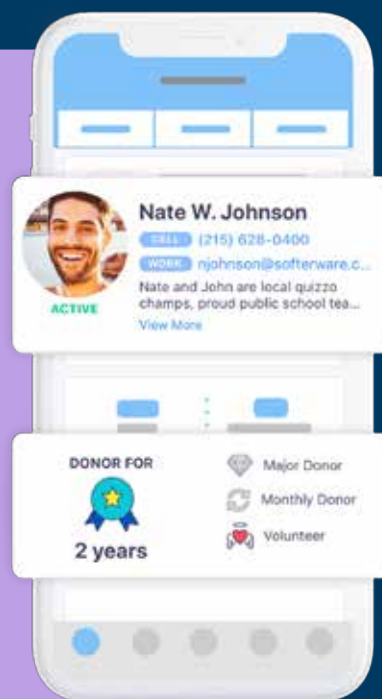
It's high time we focus squarely on the goal and stop talking around it. Like most consequential change, it's going to require new language. Not everyone will be comfortable with that. But if you want to be at the edge, step up to the future waiting to emerge.



Cyndi Suarez  
President and Editor in Chief  
NPQ



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# Defining *Pro-Black*

by Cyndi Suarez

■  
Imagining a  
pro-Black sector  
did not come  
easily to the  
writers with whom  
I spoke. However,  
the contours  
are beginning  
to take shape.  
One thing is for  
sure: People want  
more humanity.  
At the center of it  
is Black comfort  
and joy.

There is a shift afoot in the field, from critiquing white supremacist culture and calling out anti-Blackness to designing for pro-Blackness. So, we followed up with some of the writers who lent their expertise to this edition, and also interviewed Shanelle Matthews, the communications director for the Movement for Black Lives, in order to go more deeply into defining what we mean by pro-Blackness. We asked them the following questions:

*What does pro-Black mean?*

*What are the characteristics of a pro-Black organization?*

*What would a pro-Black sector sound, look, taste, and feel like?*

The conversations that ensued can be found in full in this issue of *NPQ*. What follows are some of the main takeaways from those interviews.

## WHAT DOES *PRO-BLACK* MEAN?

The key characteristic of pro-Blackness is that it deals with power. In fact, pro-Black means not only directly dealing with power but also **building power for Black people**. As such, it is perceived as a bold or daring statement that often triggers discomfort in white people.







“For me, the root of this conversation is power.”

—Shanelle Matthews

Dax-Devlon Ross, writer and equity and impact strategist, shares his reaction to being invited to be part of a conversation on being pro-Black:

It made me think of Black Power and discomfort. . . . It also made me feel a certain level of challenge. I thought, Oh, they want to go there with this! And it literally sent a sensory experience through my body. And I thought, Okay, let's go; let's actually explore this and try to forget about all the people who might be offended, or who might say, “Oh, but what do you mean, and who are you leaving out?”. . . . Let's just name and center this right here as *pro-Black*.

Liz Derias, codirector at CompassPoint, a nonprofit leadership development practice that has been focusing on pro-Black approaches for the past few years, says,

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.

Shanelle Matthews, communications director for the Movement for Black Lives, says,

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.

Building pro-Black power requires an understanding of what power means for Black people. Derias says,

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.

Matthews agrees:

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 make decisions, just like everybody else—about schools, education, 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 . . . and other essential needs.

There is a point of tension about whether pro-Blackness takes anything away from other racialized groups. For Ross, his expected negative reaction from white people is one that demonstrates a misperception of what pro-Black actually means. He says,

It's not just a place where Black folks can thrive and be. It's a place where *all* folks can thrive and be. Because in my understanding, and how I have referenced and thought about history, whenever Blackness is centered, everybody wins.

However, Isabelle Moses, chief of staff at Faith in Action, has a different take:

I guess it depends on what people value, what they perceive as giving up versus not giving up. So, if people value having the top job, and if that's a zero-sum thing—where the only way you can express leadership or power is by being the top of whatever the food chain



“Pro-Blackness isn’t a zero-sum game.  
It shouldn’t be seen as anti anything else.”

—Isabelle Moses

is, or the apex predator, so to speak—then yeah, you might feel like you’re giving up something. But if you can reframe what it means to be powerful, then I think we have a chance. . . .

So, it just depends on how people think about what the trade-offs are. And I think if we can collectively reframe the trade-offs, then we get closer to creating more conditions for more people to thrive—which, in my opinion, is way more rewarding than having the most money that I could possibly have for myself.

For Matthews, there isn’t a misperception about what pro-Black means in terms of power. In fact, that is exactly where things fall apart. She observes that being pro-Black Lives Matter does not mean one is pro-Black. The “racial reckoning” of the last few years has led many to publicly voice their commitment to the Black Lives Matter social movement. But class interests often clash with these commitments. She says,

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 . . . but those actions are insufficient. . . . The question we have to ask ourselves is, What are we willing to give up in order to be pro-Black?

Moses concludes:

Pro-Blackness isn’t a zero-sum game. It shouldn’t be seen as anti anything else. I think right now there’s this kind of binary orientation. But I think we need to understand pro-Blackness as a way of saying pro-everybody—and by that I don’t mean the equivalent of “all lives matter”! What I do mean is that if you’re pro-Black, you are actually pro-everybody, because you can’t be pro-everybody if you’re not pro-Black.

Pro-Black also means **Black people being able to be authentic**. Kad Smith, an organizational development consultant, asks, “What would it look like to truly honor the experiences of Black folks, with no asterisk? . . . As in, no conditions attached to the question of what kind of Blackness is palatable and what kind isn’t.” Quoting from a CompassPoint-led cohort member, Smith continues: “Pro-Blackness just looks like being comfortable in my skin.”

Matthews echoes this:

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 uprise 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.

For Moses, the path to pro-Black is a very personal one of **becoming grounded in Black culture**, as both identity and community.

I live in Detroit, Michigan. I’ve been here for about four and a half years. And one of the reasons I moved here was to be grounded more in Black culture. I grew up in a supersocialized, white context in San Francisco, going to private schools. Then I lived in Washington, D.C., for a long time. And I wanted to have a more rooted experience in Black communities. And Detroit, I felt, was a place where I could have that experience of being somewhere that really values and centers Black culture as just everyday life. I felt like I hadn’t had that experience before. . . . So, that sense of rootedness in Black community is something that I have been longing for.



She continues,

I've learned that it takes more than just having Black skin. What I've learned, at least for myself, is that because of the era that I grew up in—the colorblind era, the eighties and early nineties, when folks were embracing this kind of assimilation mantra—I needed to reclaim my identity as a Black person. Because the frame that you're asked to assimilate into is obviously a white normative frame.

Basically, to be pro-Black is to not have to adhere to the white-dominant status quo.

### WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A PRO-BLACK ORGANIZATION?

Themes are emerging for those building pro-Black organizations. At its most basic, it means **being able to talk about issues affecting Black people**. Smith shares,

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.

This is very tied to another characteristic of a pro-Black organization: **Black people being able to step into power without punishment**. Smith explains, "A couple of folks from the [CompassPoint] cohort mentioned safety. Safety from discrimination, from undeserved consequences, from systems of oppression."

Being disadvantaged by existing organizational policies is also punitive. Derias shares,

When I came in [to CompassPoint], I observed that the majority of people who worked at the organization were women, and all the Black women at the organization were mothers. . . . 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. . . . 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. 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 . . . can get care for their children. . . . When we center Black people, we challenge the punitive nature of organizations.

Isabelle Moses agrees.

We operate at Faith in Action under the belief that if you take care of Black people, specifically Black women, everyone in the organization will be taken care of—because the needs of Black women in particular are often so overlooked. And Black women are expected to be the providers, the caretakers, the folks who do things without actually ever being asked, and a lot of that labor goes unseen, unrecognized, unappreciated. And if you start to pay attention to all of the things that Black women do to make an organization successful, and then you provide



“Building pro-Black organizations means going beyond challenging structures to **designing new structures with the values and needs of Black people at the center.**”

—Cyndi Suarez

resources and support for that work to be compensated, to be appreciated, to be recognized, then you realize how much more people actually need in order to thrive in organizations.

And when you meet those needs—when you create space for people to take care of their families during the workday; when you create space for people to take meaningful vacations so that they get actual rest; when you create the conditions for really strong benefits and policies, so people’s healthcare needs are provided for (and they’re not worried about whether they can make their doctor’s appointments on time, because they know that they have the time off to do that); when you create an environment where people aren’t going to be pressured to deliver things at the last minute, because you build in time and space for thoughtful planning so it doesn’t end up on somebody’s plate (often a Black woman’s)—then you can create an organization where Black women can thrive. And if Black women are thriving, everybody is thriving. That’s our fundamental belief.

Building pro-Black organizations means going beyond challenging structures to **designing new structures with the values and needs of Black people at the center.** Derias says,

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.

Some organizations institute sabbaticals, which give staff much-needed time to reflect and consider their next move in the work. At Faith in Action, staff who have been there for ten years or longer are eligible. Moses explains,

Depending on what they need, [a sabbatical can be] anywhere from three to five months. And they can put together a plan for the time. Our colleague Denise Collazo used her time to write a book, *Thriving in the Fight*. Denise has been organizing for twenty-five years and is now our chief of external affairs. And she talks a lot about how that sabbatical was one of the ways in which she got the space that she needed to do the reflection for that book. So, she was able to use that time off to get clear about how it was that she was able to stay in the work.

Denise was an innovator of our Family–Work Integration program, where we strive to reduce meetings on Fridays and limit email. It’s not a day off, but it is a day that you can use to meet whatever needs you have—to catch up on any work from the week that didn’t get done, or sleep in a little and go to a gym class, or take your mom to a doctor’s appointment, or take care of that errand that you’ve been meaning to do—so that you don’t end up feeling like there’s no time for those activities that are really important for one’s well-being. If you center well-being, then you create more opportunity to do better work . . . And people are happier. We have a much happier culture.

Building pro-Black organizations also includes **resourcing Black programmatic work.** Derias shares,

We had a plurality of Black staff for the first time in CompassPoint’s forty-seven years. . . . This is important to note, because what we found . . . 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

“You have to have meaningful representation of Black folks in leadership, in order for that ethos to get rooted all the way through the organization.”

—Isabelle Moses

important for us to resource our Black programmatic work.

Moses agrees, and she shares how being a recipient of a MacKenzie Scott gift makes it possible.

We want to make sure that our teams are resourced. With the gift that we got last year from MacKenzie Scott, we now have the resources to make sure that people can work reasonable hours. If there's a gap in the organization, we can create a job description and recruit for it. We don't have to operate out of scarcity; we can operate out of abundance. And that's so exciting.

This type of pro-Black change in an organization usually requires **having Black leadership**. Moses says,

I have a hard time seeing how folks who aren't Black can understand what Black folks need in an organization. Truly. And how they would be able to resource it at the level that's required. That doesn't necessarily mean the top people all need to be Black; it just means you have to have meaningful representation of Black folks in leadership, in order for that ethos to get rooted all the way through the organization. I've worked in organizations where there were Black staff, but we didn't have enough power for things to change.

**Supporting Black leaders** is also critical. I, and others, have written extensively about how they do not have the support they need and often face the sector's most pressing challenges.<sup>1</sup> Derias says,

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.

The challenges Black leaders face come from systemic, sectorwide forms *and* from within organizations and black staff, many of whom want to be **experimenting with alternatives to hierarchy**.

CompassPoint provides an example. The organization recently underwent a leadership transition that included an interim period during which it tried the holacracy method of decentralized management. It then decided to move forward with a codirectorship model. As Derias describes it,

At the core for [CompassPoint] 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.

Smith, who was at CompassPoint during this time of change, adds nuance.

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.

Supporting Black leadership can appear to be in conflict with what Smith refers to as Black self-determination. He asks, “What does it look like to have autonomy and agency in an organization that intrinsically depends on collaboration?”

Ross sees this conflict around leadership and forms in his work, too.



“Pro-Black creates the space for that which needs to evolve to evolve.”

—Dax-Devlon Ross

What can come next can only come next if we allow for something that has not been allowed, has not been given space to really, *really* breathe. When I think about organizations, they're still not giving space to breathe. . . .

How I see that showing up primarily right now is in many ways centered on the question of how we organize ourselves as an entity. And so you're seeing a lot of folks contesting the model of hierarchy that organizes and cements power in this very concentrated place at the top of the organizational chart. People really want to contest that and find out what are the distributive ways in which we can organize ourselves. . . .

Pro-Black creates the space for that which needs to evolve to evolve. Pro-Black, to me, is connected to the notion of adaptation. It's connected to, and very much rooted in, the notion of interdependence. It is connected to and rooted in the notion of ideas around vulnerability, and different forms of knowledge and knowing. All of those are invitations to do the exploratory work that is necessary to find out what is next.

There is an opportunity for nonprofit organizations to evolve by **learning from Black people's history and victories**, particularly around how to build liberatory identities. Ross says,

A lot of organizations are in the midst of an identity crisis right now. After two years of racial reckoning, they are really deeply asking, “Who are we?” It's being asked at the generational level. We have younger folks . . . asking the organizations who they are, and it's causing older folks to ask the question of themselves. . . .

And who in our country has had their identity contested again and again and again, and has had to figure out who they are again and again and again? Black folks. Identity has always been a question: “Are you really

human?” “Are you American?” That question of identity has always been at the core of how we have had to orient ourselves and survive. . . .

What can nonprofits learn from folks who've had to go through that and answer that question repeatedly over their history in this country?

One way that Black people have defined liberatory identities is by **moving beyond binaries to hold multiplicity**. This can be a challenge for everyone, including Black people. Ross says,

I spend a lot of time looking at Patricia Hill Collins's work around Black feminist epistemologies. . . . I find myself referring repeatedly to an article she wrote thirty-six years ago. . . .

She was pushing against binaries in her work. She says—and I paraphrase—“Don't use what I am proposing here as a world, as the replacement for what currently exists, because that is a problem as well.” That's still the binary. . . . It's much more complex and nuanced to recognize and be able to hold the multiplicity around it. . . .

And, to be quite honest, one of the things that I find in organizational spaces right now—that is, I think, a developmental process—is that the calling out of white supremacist culture is being used as its own kind of bludgeon. It's becoming now its own orthodoxy, and so everything has to line up in that way.

For Matthews, becoming a pro-Black organization depends on the people in it doing difficult, personal work. For this, the organization needs to be **providing political education**. She says,

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



“[Pro-Black] looks like people being trusted to have a sense of what’s needed.”—Dax-Devlon Ross

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.

There is tension or conflict not only within organizations, and between organizations and movements, but within movements as well. Matthews shares that movement spaces aren’t always pro-Black either. She admits, “Our movements can be inhospitable to people who are growing.”

### WHAT WOULD A PRO-BLACK SECTOR SOUND, LOOK, TASTE, AND FEEL LIKE?

Imagining a pro-Black sector did not come easily to the writers with whom I spoke. However, the contours are beginning to take shape. One thing is for sure: People want more humanity. At the center of it is Black comfort and joy.

**The sound would be that of a space ringing with the laughter of Black solidarity.** Ross says,

There’s laughter, there’s commiseration. [Leaders of color are] finding community with each other, and they’re not seeing one another as competitors or as people they need to feel threatened by. They’re defining their tribe.

**It would look like trust.** Ross says,

It looks like people being trusted to have a sense of what’s needed but also of what’s comfortable and what’s connected to impact. Because if it’s not connected to impact—if it’s not connected to what our mission is—why are you putting it on me? . . . My presence and how I show up in the world shouldn’t be making you comfortable or uncomfortable.



**. . . And the trust would extend to foundation partners really resourcing this work.** Derias says,

It’s really important that we not be beholden to projects or initiatives that have concrete, predetermined outcomes driven by our foundation folks. . . . 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.

**It would taste like the deliciousness of complexity.** Ross imagines,

It would taste like some kind of fruit that sort of explodes in your mouth, and each bite provides you with something distinct that you never imagined before. You’ve had that flavorful dish that starts off tasting one way with that first bite, and then the second bite adds another flavor, and the third bite another, and it produces a sensory joyfulness that you want to keep processing. You’re not trying to just get to the next bite—you’re really enjoying the bite that’s in your mouth, what’s going down.

**It would feel relaxed.** Ross says,

There’s a lot of haste in the work. A lot of unnecessary urgency pervades. And I think pro-Black space, pro-Black identity, pro-Black work, and folks who are centered in pro-Blackness are very clear—we need to slow down sometimes.

“There is no pinnacle of pro-Blackness at which one will arrive. . . .  
We are changing, and our material conditions are changing, all the time.  
And we have to evolve with those changes.”—Shanelle Matthews

Different cultures can have different relationships with time. For people of color, it can be more qualitative than quantitative.

Moses shares how Faith in Action has instituted rituals that are familiar to staff of color, such as spending considerable time in meetings checking in. She says,

We recently had an hour-long meeting with twenty-five people, and we spent twenty-five minutes of the meeting with everyone calling in the ancestor that they wanted to bring into the space. And then we spent thirty-five minutes getting all the business done that we needed to do. And when you spend twenty-five minutes hearing each other’s personal stories, that’s a way of centering Blackness, centering Black culture, and centering the fact that we are more than the people in this room. We are all the people who came before us. We are all of the wishes and aspirations that our ancestors had for us, and often have exceeded those. . . . And when you really create space for that conversation, it builds community, it builds deeper trust, it builds deeper relationship, and it allows for better conditions for the work.

For Matthews, pro-Black is ultimately an aspiration:

If you look at the trajectory of the Black liberation movement throughout the twentieth and the

twenty-first centuries, there are some clear indications that the movement is becoming more pro-Black. . . . One of the major distinctions 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 would say, “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 is no pinnacle of pro-Blackness at which one will arrive. . . . 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.

## NOTE

1. See, for example, Cyndi Suarez, “Leaders of Color at the Forefront of the Nonprofit Sector’s Challenges,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, February 3, 2022, [nonprofitquarterly.org/leaders-of-color-at-the-forefront-of-the-nonprofit-sectors-challenges/](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/leaders-of-color-at-the-forefront-of-the-nonprofit-sectors-challenges/).

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# Resistance and Radical Love

## The Call-Forward of a Pro-Black Sector

by *Dax-Devlon Ross*

Organizations that adapt to the new demands of people with a new consciousness have a chance to survive. But to do so . . . they will need to reinvigorate themselves with the spirit of resistance and radical love that the Black freedom movements—to which this sector owes so much—have taught are essential to change.

### I. THE DAWN OF EVERYTHING

In their recent book *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, archaeologist David Wengrow and the late anarchist-anthropologist David Graeber present a take on the story of human history that upends everything we have been taught to believe about how humans once lived, why we became what we are, and, most important, the inevitability of our social arrangements—specifically, hierarchy and inequality.<sup>1</sup>

The book opens with a radical reappraisal of eighteenth-century European civilization. The narrative that we are fed in school is that the Age of Enlightenment was this glorious culmination of human history—the ultimate flowering of a species that had bumbled around in superstition and savagery for thousands of years until it discovered agriculture, at which point such things as standing armies, grain stockpiles, labor specialization, the scientific method, and, ultimately, democracy propelled us out of the backwaters of the Middle Ages. Modern, advanced civilization as we know it flourished exclusively in Europe because, as popular historians like Jared Diamond have told us in recent decades, certain sociological and geographical forces combined with technological advances wrought by plentiful available resources gave Europe a head start on the rest of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Graeber and Wengrow use the archaeological and anthropological record to puncture this virtually airtight view of human progress. Specifically, through evidence—much of which has been available to their fields for decades but elided for assorted ideological reasons—they compellingly reveal that the origins of the critique that catapulted forward Enlightenment thinking actually arose from Native American critiques of European society in the 1700s.<sup>3</sup> These critiques were, in turn, appropriated by disgruntled intellectuals challenging the various monarchies ruling over their wretched, violent, and generally brief lives. Graeber and Wengrow meticulously document the growing popularity of this social critique in France several







**By the mid-nineteenth century, the notion that a nonwhite person had a distinct worldview, let alone one that challenged the order of things, was just too outrageous to take at face value.**

decades before the revolution that would signal the beginning of the modern democratic state. Via salon-style conversations, best-selling novels, and long-running plays, French culture devoured Native American stories that consistently denigrated coarse competition, greed, privatization of property, and blind fealty to church and state—not to mention one’s duty to proper society—basically, everything that feudal France stood for.<sup>4</sup> For most, France—indeed, all of Europe—was an unpleasant world to live in, and the Native critique gave language to that angst and a vision for an entirely other way of life. “The idea that our current ideals of freedom, equality and democracy are somehow products of the ‘Western tradition,’” write Graeber and Wengrow, “would in fact come as an enormous surprise to someone like Voltaire.”<sup>5</sup>

Alas, this is not where that story ends.

The critique threatened the pecuniary and expansionist interests of those who saw in the “New World” vast land to expropriate. Those interests found their moral vector in the writings of Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, an economist who considered the Native American critique “disturbing, even dangerous,” and in turn proposed a countercritique: Native societies were savage;<sup>6</sup> whatever so-called “freedoms” they enjoyed came at the expense of technological innovations that benefited humanity by evolving it to its next phase of social development; inequality and hierarchy were unfortunate yet unavoidable by-products of progress. According to Turgot’s social evolution theory, “Egalitarian societies were banished to the bottom of this ladder, where at best they could provide some insight on how our distant ancestors might have lived; but certainly could no longer be imagined

as equal parties to a dialogue about how the inhabitants of wealthy and powerful societies should conduct themselves in the present.”<sup>7</sup> (Turgot helped invent a secular, humanist “Doctrine of Discovery,” and counted Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations* [1776], among his admirers.)

There was still one problem. What was to be done with the Indigenous American critique? That genie couldn’t be rebottled—the new ideas stoked by the New World thinkers were too alluring. History’s solution was to credit European philosophers with originating enlightenment ideas that they had then transmuted through fictitious Native American social critics in order to avoid charges of social heresy. This convoluted and racist rationale not only stuck, it traveled back across the Atlantic—so that, when Frederick Douglass articulately denounced American slavery a century later, even sympathetic white audiences questioned his authenticity. Either he had never been enslaved, they whispered, or he was parroting the ideas that had been fed to him by abolitionist benefactors like William Lloyd Garrison.<sup>8</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, the notion that a nonwhite person had a distinct worldview, let alone one that challenged the order of things, was just too outrageous to take at face value.

## **II. ANTI-BLACK BOOBY TRAPS AND WHITE SUPREMACY FAIL-SAFES**

In many ways, the critique of white supremacy culture that took center stage amid the racial reckoning of 2020 mirrored the Native American critique of European culture four hundred years earlier. Like its antecedent, the white supremacy culture critique struck at deeply held beliefs core to the dominant group’s identity. In recasting key features of white supremacy—individualism, perfectionism, hypercompetitiveness, hierarchical power structures, fixation on control, and presumption of superiority—as cultural preferences rather than universal truths, the critique forced white people of goodwill to ask themselves if they may have inadvertently colluded with a toxic system rigged to benefit their interests. Suddenly facing the twin crises of conscience and legitimacy, they turned to Black people for advice, and thus spawned the antiracist shelf at your local bookstore.

Within the nonprofit sector, something else occurred. Organizations eager to root out white supremacy culture went on ephemeral diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) journeys. For a season or two, it became the thing to do—a way of signaling to the world that they were with the times, on the right side

of history, doing the work, and so on. Invariably, the first step on the penance pilgrimage, aside from holding space for dialogue, was to go on a vision quest for authentic Black leaders—preferably and ideally, Black women. In short order, my LinkedIn feed became a waterfall of Black faces with fancy new titles. It was a dope moment in time.

If only solving racism were that simple.

Once inside, the new Black leaders discovered they'd been set up. That racial equity initiative that they'd been sold on in the interview process? Well, they were it. Oh, and the board was still really struggling to get behind this new strand of antiracist work; it just wasn't resonating with them. And just one more *smallish* thing: The staff of color? Yeah, they were fed up with the entrenched power dynamics, which they viewed as features of white supremacy culture—and they expected their new Black leader to do something about it.

For their part, the Black leaders took each shock to the system in stride. Nothing had ever come easy, so why would this be any different? Besides, they had fought to get into a position to make the changes they were now poised to make. So, they rallied their teams with a mix of inspiration, determination, commitment, and charisma. But once the work began and even the *appearance* of change materialized in the hazy distance, an assortment of anti-Black booby traps and white supremacy fail-safes manifested:

- Isn't a focus on race too narrow?
- I think we've already done plenty to address this issue already.
- Talking about racism may compromise our nonpartisan status.
- We don't have many people of color in our community, so this doesn't really apply to us.
- What are the measures we're using here?
- Who authorized this?
- What are the credentials of these people we're bringing in?

Frankly, it was bizarre. Everyone could acknowledge that there were systemic barriers to access and certain ways of operating that just weren't conducive to an antiracist workplace, but aside from hiring a Black leader, no one seemed prepared for the change work ahead. Not even Black leaders.

And why should they have been?

**Invariably, the first step on the penance pilgrimage, aside from holding space for dialogue, was to go on a vision quest for authentic Black leaders—preferably and ideally, Black women.**

As one senior nonprofit leader I recently interviewed said, “Ten years ago we couldn't even utter the word *racism* in our organization.” Another revealed, “I learned to stop being a rebel a long time ago.” At a certain point, they and others I have interviewed realized that they were operating in a white-dominant sector, and decided to play by its rules. They got the right degrees from the right schools. They gained the requisite leadership and management skills that the sector said they needed in order to get ahead. They earned the trust of the gatekeepers. In exchange, the system rewarded them with more authority and responsibility.

In truth, as brilliant and accomplished as these Black leaders were, they couldn't possibly be the living, breathing antidotes to white supremacy culture everyone had secretly hoped for. In fact, they often symbolized the exact opposite of a remedy. Many of these leaders had never spent time within Black organizing and movement traditions. By and large, their careers had been nurtured within white institutional power structures. Their very existence at the top of their organizational chart further validated Turgot's theory: Once enlightened through education and exposure, even the descendants of the enslaved and oppressed embrace social evolution's inevitable demands for hierarchy and inequality.

In fairness, the entire arrangement was totally fucked up. Somehow, the same job that their white predecessor had performed without any racial competence now demanded expertise in Afrocentrism, Black radicalism, Black liberation theory, Black feminism, and Black futurism—not to mention a certificate in somatics for racial healing.

And yet, the injustice of the outsized expectations thrust upon Black leaders does not change the fact that the

**While individual organizations are coming to terms with the new reality that changes are necessary, the sector as a whole has yet to fully grasp that the traditional rules of engagement are no longer applicable.**

nonprofit sector is at an existential impasse. Is it a coincidence that so many nonprofit organizations—grassroots to corporate, hyperlocal to national—are experiencing internal turmoil? That overworked frontline staff everywhere are refusing to remain silent about the injustices they see? That turnover is so staggeringly high, and once sought-after positions remain unfilled? That managers are so fearful of saying or doing the wrong thing that they choose silence and acquiescence over the risk of being called out? Or that leaders, even those of color, feel so battered by the unrelenting assault from their people, who are themselves hurting?

These are all casualties of a workplace civil war, the stakes of which are the identity and future direction of a sector. Some of the turmoil and accompanying turnover is necessary. We do need to hold each other—and be held—accountable when we create harm. We also need to appreciate that we are all operating within a system of intersecting oppressions and often just doing the best we can with the tools at our disposal. This isn't an apology or a scolding. It is just a reminder that progressive communities are often eroded from within.

While individual organizations are coming to terms with the new reality that changes are necessary, the sector as a whole has yet to fully grasp that the traditional rules of engagement are no longer applicable. For the past two generations, young people who wanted to give back and carry forward civil and human rights struggles had three options: government, education, or the nonprofit sector. That's no longer the case. The private sector has caught on in the past two years. It has figured out that younger workers expect their employers to align with their

values—that is, to be diverse and inclusive, yes, but also engaged in the social justice issues that matter to them. And now that the racial reckoning and remote work have arrived, some of the most recognizable companies in the world are competing hard for the same talented, idealistic, and committed young people—those of color especially—who once fell into the nonprofit sector's lap.

What this all means is that quality candidates—especially those of color and with choices—will no longer accept starvation wages as a rite of passage. It also means that people expect to have a meaningful say in the work—where, how much, how fast, and for whose benefit. And, they expect their organizations to take a stand on the issues that matter to them, even if doing so is risky.

This predicament can't be resolved with a new strategic plan alone or a DEI journey that has no real objective or destination. The voices pushing for change demand new arrangements among free people who elect to work for a cause they care about. Yet, from the privileged perch upon which I sit as an outsider-insider, many in the sector are still operating as if it were 2019. The people closest and most essential to the work are still paid the least and asked to do the most. The people in charge are still making top-down decisions that affect the lives of those they claim to care about. Accountability still flows to funders first and foremost. Funders are still reluctant to make transformative investments in the new leaders of color and get out of the way. Transparency is spotty. Distrust is high. In a nutshell, many (but definitely not all) in the sector are spinning their wheels in a snowbank.

### **III. CENTERING BLACK EPISTEMOLOGIES**

Given everything that I have laid out, the fresh perspective on human history that *The Dawn of Everything* offers us couldn't have come at a better time. The archaeological records that it lays before readers show us that early humans were much more creative and inventive—even playful—than the standard narrative of human progress allows. Graeber and Wengrow introduce us to societies that oscillated between egalitarian and authoritarian structures depending on the time of year and the needs of the community, and societies that intentionally eschewed agriculture because it wasn't worth giving up the freedoms they enjoyed, not because they didn't know how to plant and grow food. They reveal the outlines of ancient cities inhabited by thousands yet without any sign of centralized government as we understand it. In fact, the authors conclude that for the last five

thousand years of human history, the empires and kingdoms that figure so prominently in our imaginative (indeed, cinematic) universe were “exceptional islands of political hierarchy, surrounded by much larger territories whose inhabitants . . . systematically avoided fixed, overarching systems of authority.”<sup>9</sup> In many of these territories, even when the leader issued a pronouncement, the rank and file could choose consent or dissent without fear of punishment—because that was what freedom meant.

In this way, and despite the many faults critics will surely find with the book, *The Dawn of Everything* destabilizes our notion of the one thing that matters most to the powerful: the sovereignty of the West’s history-of-the-world narrative as we know it.

But what does all of this mean to the nonprofit sector?

This: If these ancestors of ours weren’t “ignorant savages” (as we have been led to believe), and the narrative of social evolution, which tells us that they led “primitive,” simplistic lives devoid of political consciousness, is contrary to the actual record, then what else is counterfactual? If rather than not knowing any better they consciously chose to arrange their lives to facilitate freedom of fealty and egalitarianism over hierarchy, what did they know that we seem to have lost sight of? Once we are liberated from the straitjacket of received histories curated to confine our imagination to Europe (and, by extension, Anglo America) as the center of civilization, what other options for organizing our affairs become available to us? And then, once unencumbered by the grip of Western conceptions of what constitutes knowledge, reality—indeed, civilization itself—where might we look for guidance on alternative conceptions?

In the American context, the answer is obvious. We need to look to the lineages that have been actively resisting cultural, economic, physical, psychological, and epistemological destruction for as long as it has been imposed upon them. How have they perceived reality? How have they operated? What have they believed? What have they desired? And, most important, how have they survived? This necessarily challenges a sector in crisis to engage—not just go on a learning journey—the realities, theories, and ideologies of the people who have sought safe harbor in its midst and for whom, by and large, the sector exists in the first place: oppressed, minoritized, and otherwise marginalized communities—that is, folks of color.

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Historically, the sector has never felt obligated to engage with the worldviews, theories, or ideologies presented by nonwhite people. Because that knowledge has been traditionally developed and practiced on the margins of the gate-keeping institutions, in secret and often in defiance of its norms, it has been regarded as “folk wisdom” or “traditional knowledge”—a polite way of saying *inferior*. When that knowledge has directly challenged the dominant worldview using the master’s tools, it and its creators have been vigorously discredited, often by other folks of color who have been provided a megaphone—as we are witnessing in real time with critical race theory. Finally, when neither that knowledge nor its creators can be silenced, it is either assimilated—the words *lived experience* and *intersectionality* are uttered ad nauseum in the sector—or whitewashed, as is the case with Dr. King each January.

At its essence, my vision for a pro-Black sector is one in which we are all comfortable showing up in the work as ourselves rather than as that which a white ideal says we need to be in order to be considered valid; we are witnessed and appreciated for who we are and what we bring rather than disparaged for what we are not and what we don’t; we are believed and listened to when we share our knowledge, even when such knowledge is derived from unconventional sources; we are meaningfully and honestly consulted on decisions that impact our lives; we are trusted to do the work we have been called to do without being second-guessed or surveilled; we take time to face the conflicts that naturally arise among people trying to change—even, and especially, when doing so is uncomfortable; we have the agency to challenge



**In a very real sense, Black liberation movements offer a starting point for nonprofits asking themselves who they are and what their purpose is.**

inequity and injustice, whether its source is external or internal; we are led by people of integrity who are accountable to our collective best interests, not just their own career advancement.

Just as I do not believe that hiring a Black person resolves organizational DEI issues, I also do not believe that replacing white supremacy culture with pro-Black principles automatically ensures the sector's salvation. What I do believe is that a sector that centers pro-Black practices and behaviors can help us *all* shed the constraints—polite rather than kind, nice rather than truthful, passive-aggressive rather than accountable, fear-based rather than trust-based, competitive rather than cooperative, tight-fisted rather than generous, rigid rather than adaptive, and impersonal rather than loving—that so many of us know afflict the current organizational ethos.

So, in this moment of upheaval, what if the sector were to take seriously not just the Black people calling for change but also Black worldviews and theories embedded within liberatory movements that have facilitated Black survival and thriving in a society hostile to its existence? What organizing features (guiding principles, beliefs, and values) might be revealed and used to address the dissonance in our midst?<sup>10</sup> To be clear, I am not proposing an exhaustive or even comprehensive taxonomy at this juncture; I am interested in beginning to surface the ways in which Black liberatory struggles—pro-Black agendas—have confronted *some* of the issues at play within the nonprofit sector at this moment, in hopes that bringing them to the foreground may broaden the conversation and, crucially, stoke genuine experimentation within organizations struggling to move through the seemingly unending waves of conflict.

#### **IV. EIGHT PRINCIPLES FOR A TRANSFORMED SECTOR**

**1. The question of identity.** At the top of the year, I met with leaders from three different organizations in a single afternoon. Back-to-back calls. These leaders didn't know one another, functioned in different fields, and were based in vastly different parts of the country: the Southeast, the Midwest, and Southern California. They shared the same basic story, however: Up until two years ago, they knew exactly who they were; but now, one didn't know if their nonprofit was a social justice organization or an education-access program; the second didn't know if their mission was to advocate for policy changes or to promote racial healing; and the third didn't know if their organization existed to create jobs toward opportunity for youth or to create political activists to fight the system.

The ripple effects of 2020 are being felt everywhere in the sector, but especially vis-à-vis the question of identity: Who are we, now that we have named racism as a feature of our work?

Since arriving on slave ships, Black folks have been asked and have had to ask ourselves time and time again who we are and where we fit. And in every moment in which Black identity has been attacked, Black liberation movements have arisen to give a sense of coherence, dignity, and purpose to a people on the brink of physical and psychological obliteration. Every one of these movements—Black emancipation, Black suffrage, Black Power, Black Lives Matter—have offered three anchors to their adherents: a compelling counternarrative, a community of care, and a spiritual base.

In a very real sense, Black liberation movements offer a starting point for nonprofits asking themselves who they are and what their purpose is. Many of these organizations had great success telling a story that no longer resonates in 2022, because it had been soft-pedaled for a white audience. Many lost both their unofficial and official culture carriers—usually women of color—to exhaustion, frustration, or, simply, an opportunity they had been qualified for a decade ago. Now these organizations are searching for a new story and new culture carriers, but they are finding both hard to come by unless they commit to change regardless of whether or not it comes at a cost. Unfortunately, many organizations are just not there yet. They still want the high-powered donors *and* to be all about social justice, when history shows that those two streams inevitably converge, and one must give way to the other.

So, to the organizations asking themselves who they are, my response is: Figure out what your story is, who your community is, and what are their deepest beliefs.

**2. The demand for moral authority.** It is no secret that traditional leadership structures are being contested in the nonprofit sector. Shared leadership, collective leadership, and distributed leadership have all gained currency in the past two years. The theory I've been feeling of late is that leaders within the nonprofit sector are rarely chosen by the staff or by the communities they are brought in to represent. Increasingly, these handpicked leaders serve at the pleasure of disconnected boards who hire people to reflect their values, beliefs, and interests. This approach to leadership selection is a problem—an affront, actually—to people for whom the work is not just a job but a calling.

Black Lives Matter faced criticism when it consciously eschewed the traditional leadership model and resisted the media's attempts to impose a single figurehead upon the movement. Instead, leaders who proved their credibility on the ground organically emerged and were put forward by the people within the movement. This is very much in keeping with the historical record of traditional Black leadership. Folks are called to lead because they have something vital to contribute to the cause. They are granted conditional authority so long as they are accountable to the people and the people's interests. The moment they break that bond ("sell out," so to speak), their authority within pro-Black cultural spaces is revoked, even if white America continues to regard them as credible.

Nonprofit organizations are chock-full of talented, credible people who are overlooked or bypassed by decision makers—boards, donors—because of a perceived lack of executive-level experience or simply because they are not considered management material, when all they really mean is that they want someone like them at the helm. People in nonprofits are tired of this paternalistic attitude and condescending notion that the real talent must come from Wall Street or have a background in management consulting. They want people they respect—and they respect people who know, understand, and have preferably done their own work.

So, is the moral authority that people demand in their leaders and leadership structures being honored? This is the abiding leadership question that Black liberation movements present to the nonprofit sector. As long as the answer is *no*, leadership will continue to be contested.

**In Black liberation movements,  
deep trust is “My word is my bond,”  
“Come hell or high water,”  
“Ride or die,” “Til the wheels fall  
off,” and the like. Trust is earned  
through actions, not words.**

**3. The importance of trust.** The absence of trust that I have encountered in nonprofit organizations over the past two years is palpable and painful to witness. Leaders desperately want their people to believe in their intentions, and the people desperately want the organizations to grant them the space to do the work they feel called to do. The bottom-line issue is that as much as nonprofits talk about trusting their people and the community, their actions, ultimately, often don't align with what people expect from a trusting relationship.

In Black liberation movements, deep trust is “My word is my bond,” “Come hell or high water,” “Ride or die,” “Til the wheels fall off,” and the like. Trust is earned through actions, not words; deeds, not promises—hence the Black American adage, “show and prove.” Trust is so fragile and consequential because without it there is no movement. The Underground Railroad does not happen without trust. Nor does the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Nor does Selma. At its core, last year's blockbuster, *Judas and the Black Messiah*, is a story about broken trust within a Black liberation movement.<sup>11</sup>

Nonprofits would do well to take a play from the book of Barack. Black folks didn't flock to his side when he announced his candidacy back in 2007. He had to show and prove that he really understood both the struggle and the dream. Organizational leaders fretting about lost or lacking trust have to be patient and consistent. They have to accept that their mere existence does not entitle them to anything, especially from BIPOC staff and communities who have been repeatedly burned in the past. As uncomfortable as it may seem, nonprofits may just be in a state of trust limbo for a while.

**If there is one lesson that Black liberation movements tell us repeatedly and without compromise, it is that Black folks don't want to be controlled. They want sovereignty over their lives, which means agency in their work.**

**4. Networks of mutuality.** Nonprofits are constantly trying to rally the troops to buy into a unified vision. They come up with cheesy slogans like “One Vision, One Org” that never resonate with BIPOC staff—or anyone, for that matter. *Oneness* is something that has to be asserted as an email tagline when it isn't genuinely felt. And it isn't genuinely felt when it is not true. Terms like “One Org” come off as insincere mottos crafted by those in charge to convince everyone else to fall in line under their benevolent leadership. Meanwhile, interdependence—what Dr. King called a “network of mutuality”—invests a sense of shared responsibility in the group. It understands that “whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Mutuality and interdependence are, therefore, not tools of control and conformity; they are reminders that we have moral obligations to other people as we move through the world as independent beings.

If there is one lesson that Black liberation movements tell us repeatedly and without compromise, it is that Black folks don't want to be controlled. They want sovereignty over their lives, which means agency in their work—hence the significance of self-help and economic empowerment in Black political and economic history.

Many nonprofits talk about empowerment but are too top-heavy and process oriented to ever fulfill this aspiration. Instead, they tend to sap the possibility of spontaneous moral action from below. Inspired people are siloed into limiting job functions filled with busywork that both stretches

them thin and keeps them unfulfilled. The moment they dare to express an exciting idea is usually the moment the idea begins to die. Inevitably, it is met with internal gatekeepers whose job it is to politely kill creativity and redirect excess energy back onto largely meaningless tasks that keep the organization solvent but never solve the underlying issues it was set up to address.

Nonprofits have to figure out how to grant people who hunger to make a difference the individual agency that they crave—and, quite frankly, deserve—to fulfill the broader mission. That just isn't the case right now—not when so much emphasis is placed on managing people to meet sometimes arbitrary deadlines and goals that can then be distilled in a funder report. The concept of interdependence offers an alternative. In Black liberation traditions, movements are conduits for action. Anyone and everyone has both the responsibility and opportunity to take meaningful action to advance the cause in a given moment. The key, therefore, is not to control individual action through a phony appeal to oneness but to unleash collective action through individuals who are committed to the larger cause.

**5. People power.** In Black liberation movements, the people are the source of power. The people's will drives the mission. Without the people's consent and assent—which is earned through consistent, authentic engagement—there is no movement. Hence the Black Power phrase, “All power to the people.”

In striking contrast, too many nonprofits that claim to value their people treat those closest to the work like light bulbs: screw in, burn out, replace. That whole segments of the sector have come to rely on the low-wage labor of mostly Black and Brown people is a disgrace.

Relatedly, nonprofits are notoriously uncomfortable discussing power: who has it, how it exerts itself. Organizational leaders, particularly those who hold dominant identities, prefer to present as nonhierarchical, as just “one of the people.” This is not helpful. It is dishonest and disrespectful to those who know better—which is everyone.

What is needed and being called for at this moment is honesty. The phrase “Make it plain” entered the Black liberation movement lexicon by way of the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X.<sup>12</sup> He had a singular gift for truth telling that cut to the essence and connected with the soul of his audiences. Malcolm used allegory and metaphor as storytelling devices,

but he was plainspoken (not at all simplistic or dumbed down) and direct when it came to the message he was trying to convey, and the people loved him for that.

Nonprofit leaders need to learn how to speak forthrightly about power. Don't tell people that every option is on the table when that's not the case. Don't say that everyone's voice counts when some voices retain veto power. And if it is truly the case that power is shared and that everyone has a vote, negotiate what that means in practice. Then, live with the outcome.

**6. Resource sharing.** Resource hoarding and a scarcity mindset are prevailing features of rich nonprofits and foundations. In the name of prudent financial management, one underpays program staff and the other scrimps on operating costs while dodging long-term commitments. Foundations are fond of saying that they don't have enough money to solve the problems we face. This may be true, but what it amounts to is an invitation for nonprofits to duke it out. BIPOC folks in the sector see this and find it utterly reprehensible yet entirely in keeping with the way white dominance maintains its dominion.

As things stand, too many nonprofits that play in the same sandbox have now been conditioned to pretend that they alone in that sandbox are the solution. Even though they do the exact same work with the exact same population in the exact same locations, the leaders of these organizations act as if the others don't exist. By extension, they also don't partner with other social service agencies that could help them by reducing redundancies or providing their constituents with additional resources that are beyond their scope.

The conclusion I have drawn is that mutual recognition would lead to interrogating why so many organizations doing the same work operate in isolation. Instead, organizations fall or are pressured into a self-serving cycle: Because so-and-so are the only ones doing such-and-such critical work, donors, board members, and the general public must support them; otherwise, the work will not be done and an underserved population will be left stranded.

Black liberation movements never have the resources they need to address the problems their communities face. Similarly, Black- and Brown-led grassroots organizations rarely have access to resources comparable to their white counterparts. Yet, somehow they get it done anyway. They establish sharing economies—mutual aid societies, cooperative

**Black liberation movements regard conflict as a necessary feature of struggle. Conflicting viewpoints . . . are a defining theme of Black liberation and, indeed, the Black experience.**

initiatives, sou-sous—whatever it takes. Resource sharing is not a sign of weakness or lack; it is an act of unity and solidarity. At different moments in time, we need things from each other, and we shouldn't be ashamed to ask.

One of the exciting outgrowths of the new wave of BIPOC leaders has been the development of informal communities of support that they have created. I discovered the existence of one such group in New York, when a new client told me I had been recommended through her network. These groups are as much therapy sessions as they are learning communities. As one Black leader told me in a recent catch-up, "Sometimes, I just need to be able to say something and have the person on the other end of the line understand without having to explain myself."

One can only dream that this model of resource sharing can become the norm in the future.

**7. Conflict as a source of creative energy.** Because nonprofit culture reflects and reinforces white, middle-class cultural modalities by default, it tends to be conflict averse. The norm in such spaces is to present as "nice" and "polite"—to smile and appear agreeable even when the situation is not. Conflict is viewed as a bad thing, a sign of dysfunction. The upshot is that people don't get the feedback they need to grow, feelings fester, and those who do express their feelings passionately—often Black folks—are portrayed as the problem.

Black liberation movements regard conflict as a necessary feature of struggle. Conflicting viewpoints—Du Bois versus Washington, King versus Malcolm—are a defining theme of Black liberation and, indeed, the Black experience. Conflict refines vision. Conflict susses out shortcomings and blind



**In Black liberation movements, knowledge gained through observation and experience isn't just anecdotal and supplemental; it is both essential and highly credible. The popular Maya Angelou quote, "When people show you who they are, believe them," is a perfect example.**

spots. Conflict ensures accountability. Conflict ensures that the ideas that best serve the collective interests are advanced. Nonprofits need to learn how to embrace conflict and view it not as a sign of deep problems or personal failings but rather of deep investment in the work. (I have written a book about this.)<sup>13</sup>

**8. Knowledge sharing, production, and validation.** In nonprofit organizations, knowledge is often held by people with positional power. It is dispensed to others as a reward for good conduct. In contrast, within Black liberation movements, knowledge both belongs to the community and is the community's responsibility to pass on to the next generation—thus the adage "each one teach one." In part because it was historically denied and in part because there is no guarantee that the knowledge holder will survive long enough to see the struggle through, it is essential that knowledge be shared, not held.

In nonprofit organizations, knowledge is only really valued if it can be validated by purportedly objective or independent analysis conducted in such a way that is consistent with the scientific method—the quintessential Enlightenment achievement. This in turn creates a dynamic wherein "research and data" teams within nonprofits become privileged spaces. Because of the sector's fixation on hierarchy and the assumption that "hard data" produced using

something that approximates the scientific method are superior, it invariably places more value on people who can perform those tasks. Within the nonprofit sector, those people tend to be highly educated and white. And while there has been a move of late to uplift lived experience—a concept born of Black feminism and scholarship—the jury is still out on if that actually translates beyond the good vibes it provides when it is uttered in a meeting.

A year ago, I facilitated a series of meetings with a group of BIPOC leaders. Early in our work together, a team of researchers provided a data presentation of their field: youth social services. For the past decade, these data have been the definitive source of information about that field for policy-makers, funders, and the public. When the researchers finished, let's just say things got spicy. *Who did you speak to to collect these data? When did you speak to them? What questions did you ask?* Fundamentally, the leaders felt that what was being presented about their communities did not reflect the reality of their communities. As we talked, we discovered that the sources the researchers had relied on were incredibly limited and skewed heavily toward respondents who could not possibly provide credible information about their communities. It was bad enough that these leaders of color left the meeting doubting the data that had been used to frame the issues pertinent to their field for a decade; what was worse, it only took a one-hour gathering of smart people with a different set of experiences to mortally wound a study that all of the experts—researchers, policy-makers, etc.—had rubber-stamped.

In Black liberation movements, knowledge gained through observation and experience isn't just anecdotal and supplemental; it is both essential and highly credible. The popular Maya Angelou quote, "When people show you who they are, believe them," is a perfect example of how Black liberation movements conduct knowledge validation. Angelou didn't have to perform an empirical study using the scientific method to arrive at this conclusion. Nor do those who intuitively understand and agree with the sentiment feel the need to verify her claims to knowledge through a social experiment; they know in their soul that she is right. They have lived conscious, reflective lives, and have drawn conclusions that don't require any further affirmation in order to stand as truth.

The point is that the nonprofit sector has to change the way knowledge is managed, who is considered an expert, and

what, ultimately, the aim of knowledge is if the sector hopes to play a meaningful role in the lives of those it purports to represent.

## V. THE SECTOR'S NEXT ITERATION IS ALREADY TAKING SHAPE

You may be thinking that this is all well and good, but movements aren't the same as organizations. My response is twofold. In one sense, it is a strange thing that we cling to this notion that our political lives—our values and beliefs about how the world should and does work—are severable from our work lives. Through our work in the world, we not only earn our keep but also express who we are and what we care about. How can that not be political? Who decided that those two aims must operate in discrete, non-overlapping lanes? In another sense, inasmuch as movements aren't the same as organizations, human service organizations aren't businesses, either. Yet that doesn't stop armies of management consultants from trying to make nonprofits operate as such.

Truth is, nonprofits have always been something else. If we are to be really honest with one another, they were at least arguably conceived as tax dodges for the wealthy.<sup>14</sup> Only in the past four decades have they wedged themselves into the massive gaps left by government austerities, corporate greed, and gross inequality.<sup>15</sup> As such, many of us have spent our careers solving problems that we didn't create. We didn't disinvest in Black and Brown neighborhoods or underfund schools. We are just the ones who have to find our students resources so that they can succeed. The nonprofit sector has become the social stopgap, humanity's buffer—what keeps civil society from completely unraveling. To do our work—especially in a nation that scorns us because it needs us and that need reminds it of its imperfections—we have learned to adapt to ever-changing funding priorities, tax policies, community needs, and political tides.

But what if this is our moment to try something radically different? To push instead of being pushed around?

Two years ago, we all saw behind the veil. We saw what we had wrought, and we vowed to change. Now we are being coaxed back into complacency. There is no other way to say it. DEI work has stalled or is being walked back in many places, because the sector mastered the lingo but ultimately has been unwilling to adopt ways of knowing, being,

and understanding the world that Black folks have relied on for centuries to effect lasting change for themselves and others. In the last one hundred and fifty years alone, Black liberation movements delivered the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—to name just a few crucial advances everyone now benefits from. Had our movements not been undermined, maimed, and betrayed, we surely would have delivered more. Yet and still, the social sector continues to overlook the ideas, beliefs, and values that had to be in place in order for such incredible aspirations to be realized in the face of such unyielding resistance. Instead, we are told that focusing on race is too narrow or exclusionary—hogwash conjured to conceal a truth right before our eyes.

Luckily, some of us haven't forgotten what was revealed two years ago—and those voices are trying desperately to keep the sector on task: *to be what it promised*. Those who wield power can choose to hear the challenge being issued as a *call-out* or as a *call-forward*. What is inarguable is that the sector's next iteration is already taking shape. Organizations that resist the emergent order will atrophy in time. Organizations that adapt to the new demands of people with a new consciousness have a chance to survive. But to do so, they will need to experiment, play with new structural forms, embrace new modes of working—ones that center the needs of the people who do, and are closest to, the work—and allow autonomous decisioning as a norm. Above all, they will need to reinvigorate themselves with the spirit of resistance and radical love that the Black freedom movements—to which this sector owes so much—have taught are essential to change.



## NOTES

1. David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).
2. See for instance Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).
3. These critiques came about via Native American experience of the French in Canada, as well as from Native American travel to France (from Canada and from what is now called the United States) in the 1700s. See Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*.
4. The first wave of these stories (early 1700s) originated from back-and-forth exchanges that took place in North America and France. The authors encountered Native Americans in Montreal, and Native Americans visited France. Later generations (later 1700s) of these stories were based on and heavily influenced by the first generation, but by then they were typically purely fictionalized by the European authors. See *ibid.*, 53–59.
5. *Ibid.*, 17.
6. *Ibid.*, 62.
7. *Ibid.*, 61.
8. See “Frederick Douglass Project: Jay Thompson’s Essay ‘Toward Douglassian Abolitionism: The Rift Between Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison,’” in “Letters,” University of Rochester Frederick Douglass Project, [rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/2842](http://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/2842).
9. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 382.
10. Black Americans do not inhabit this domain of experience exclusively, but because my experience and expertise rest in Black American traditions, I am lifting up that worldview in this essay. For more on Black epistemologies, see Caroline Shenaz Hossein, “A Black Epistemology for the Social and Solidarity Economy: The Black Social Economy,” *The Review of Black Political Economy* 46, no. 3 (September 2019): 209–229; and Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Feminist Epistemology,” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 251–6, 266–71.
11. *Judas and the Black Messiah*, directed by Shakra King, written by Shakra King, Will Berson, Kenny Lucas, and Keith Lucas (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2021).
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13. Dax-Devlon Ross, *The Nightmare and the Dream: Nas, Jay-Z and the History of Conflict in African-American Culture* (New York: Outside the Box Publishing, 2008).
14. Kelsey Piper, “The charitable deduction is mostly for the rich. A new study argues that’s by design.,” Vox, September 3, 2019, [vox.com/future-perfect/2019/9/3/20840955/charitable-deduction-tax-rich-billionaire-philanthropy](https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/9/3/20840955/charitable-deduction-tax-rich-billionaire-philanthropy).
15. Andrew Paniello, “5 Things That Have Been Causing The Nonprofit Sector To Grow,” Blog, Ally 360, February 5, 2018, [ally360.com/5-things-causing-nonprofit-sector-grow/](http://ally360.com/5-things-causing-nonprofit-sector-grow/).

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## About the Artist: Carlos Gámez de Francisco



Carlos Gámez de Francisco was born in post-revolutionary Cuba in 1987, to a Cuban-Spanish mother and a Cuban-American father. He grew up in Cuba and was educated in an academic style heavily influenced by the Russian Academy. At age five, he determined, with absolute certainty, that he would be an artist. By the time he was fifteen, he was diligently painting eight hours a day, every day. Today, he often spends fifteen hours a day painting and feels “very blessed to do what I love.”

Gámez de Francisco arrived in the United States at the age of twenty-one with \$650 and knowing no English. He spent \$600 on art supplies and \$50 on a pair of Cortez running shoes—“Just like the ones Forrest Gump wore to run across the United States.” He committed himself to learning 100 English words every day, studying diligently, working, and painting at night. His exceptional talent, hard work, and perseverance led him to earn artistic commissions and recognition.

Gámez de Francisco frequently includes insects in his artwork. He says: “Flying insects represent freedom; falling insects represent chaos; when they are lying down, they represent balance.” His classical training was based on portraits and history, paintings that royalty and the very wealthy upper class would commission—but for him, everybody has the right to be in a portrait and draped and adorned in such a way that they appear “royal.” His work has been exhibited around the world and has won many awards.





# When Blackness Is Centered, Everybody Wins

## A Conversation with Cyndi Suarez and Dax-Devlon Ross

“Let’s just name and center this right here as *pro-Black*. It’s not just a place where Black folks can thrive and be. It’s a place where *all* folks can thrive and be. Because in my understanding, and how I have referenced and thought about history, whenever Blackness is centered, everybody wins.”

*In this conversation about defining pro-Blackness, Cyndi Suarez, the Nonprofit Quarterly’s president and editor in chief, talks with Dax-Devlon Ross, author, educator, and equity consultant, whose latest book, Letters to My White Male Friends (St. Martin’s Press, 2021), is garnering well-deserved attention.*

**Cyndi Suarez:** It’s always great talking to you, Dax, because I love the work and analysis you’re doing out there in the field on race and power, racial justice, DEI, and whatever else people are calling the work as it evolves. The recent articles that you’ve done with *NPQ*—“A Letter to My White Male Friends of a Certain Age” (which became a book that came out last year) and “Generational Differences in Racial Equity Work”—have really resonated with our readers as well.<sup>1</sup> So, when we landed on the topic of building pro-Black organizations for this issue of the magazine, I knew we had to include you in the mix. You were one of the first to start naming the generational differences. We both know that the field has been doing this work on race and power, in different iterations, for the last thirty years at least, right? And we’re only now starting to have this conversation at this level in the sector. We’re hosting this conversation for the whole year at *NPQ*, and we’re already getting a lot of response. I wanted to bring you in to talk a little bit more about the article you wrote for this edition—“Resistance and Radical Love: The Call-Forward of a Pro-Black Sector”—as well as to delve more into what it means to be pro-Black.



**Dax-Devlon Ross:** I appreciate that. So, I was very inspired by the fact that you used the term *pro-Black* in your call-out to writers for this edition. It made me really think about what is being asked here. It made me think of Black Power and discomfort—how when the phrase *Black Power* was created, not just as a term, but as a call to action, it created discomfort for a lot of Americans half a century ago. And when I meditated on your questions: What does this call for *pro-Black* mean, here and now? What does a *pro-Black* sector look like? What do *pro-Black* organizations look like? It also made me feel a certain level of challenge. I thought, Oh, they want to go there with this! And it literally sent a sensory experience through my body. And I thought, Okay, let's go; let's actually explore this and try to forget about all the people who might be offended, or who might say, "Oh, but what do you mean, and who are you leaving out?"

Let's just name and center this right here as *pro-Black*. It's not just a place where Black folks can thrive and be. It's a place where *all* folks can thrive and be. Because in my understanding, and how I have referenced and thought about history, whenever Blackness is centered, everybody wins.

And I feel like that's what's always missing from these conversations in organizations. Leadership is always saying, "If we focus too much on race, who are we forgetting, who are we leaving out?" But if we look at the history of this country, whenever we are focused on race in this way, the benefit has accrued to so many other groups of people. So, let's not get caught up in this conversation centered on fear of being too up-front around race because that might be perceived as not intersectional or not taking into consideration other experiences. Because the history of Black folks has never been one where we have not looked at and thought about other folks on the journey.

One space where this narrative can get situated in particular is that of the Black church, because the Black church is less tolerant than we would like them to be and than they probably could be. Not all the Black church, but certain strands of it—around, for instance, gay marriage. So this notion that Black folks are very socially conservative becomes a frame. And that's a dangerous frame to be putting out there in the world, because it is not an accurate representation of the history and truth of our experience.

*“Let’s think about this not just as a place where Black folks can be and thrive but also a means of thinking about where and how the values that have persisted within Black freedom struggles become the values that get mapped onto the sector.”*

So, when you put out that call for folks to think about what *pro-Black* would look like in the organizational (and intersectoral) world, my feeling was, Let's think about this not just as a place where Black folks can be and thrive but also a means of thinking about where and how the values that have persisted within Black freedom struggles become the values that get mapped onto the sector. For example, what do we know to be true about emancipation? What do we

know to be true about the fight to end Jim Crow? What do we know to be true about Black Lives Matter? These are movements that developed worldviews, epistemologies, forms of knowledge-making and creation and ways of knowing that allowed for these movements to be successful in advancing in the face of all sorts of terroristic threat. And yet, we've never really thought about how we could adopt some of what they did and do—the things that they learned and had to build around as a worldview, as a philosophy, as ideology—and apply it to our work in our sector. I hear sometimes, “Let's get some Black folks in here. Let's bring in Black folks or folks of color into the organization.” But I never hear, “How do we develop and evolve our worldview around the intelligence they bring?” Because that worldview exists already. We've seen plenty of evidence of its power and its ability to shift power, but it never gets adopted and brought in as legitimate and serious forms of organizing and developing and building in the mainstream context.

What I landed on was that I wanted to be able to help folks to think about a way forward, because a lot of organizations are in the midst of an identity crisis right now. After two years of racial reckoning, they are really deeply asking, “Who are we?” It's being asked at the generational level. We have younger folks, folks of color, folks of different identities asking the organizations who they are, and it's causing older folks to ask the question of themselves. People are struggling with their identity.

And who in our country has had their identity contested again and again and again, and has had to figure out who they are again and again and again? Black folks. Identity has always been a question: Are you really human? Are you American? That question of identity has always been at the core of how we have had to orient ourselves and survive. And if I see a sector right now really having a challenge around its identity, it's the nonprofit sector. What can it learn?

What can nonprofits learn from folks who've had to go through that and answer that question repeatedly over their history in this country? There's something to be learned there.

**CS:** There are so many directions we can go here—there's so much in what you've said. Take this idea of identity. A couple of years ago, I wrote a piece called “A Cult of

Democracy—Toward a Pluralistic Politics.”<sup>2</sup> It asked, How do you build a cult of democracy, where that becomes the most important thing over any other kind of difference in ideology? And when I set out to do research, I looked at what the political scientists and philosophers were saying, and it was all around creating subjectivities—how the most important thing right now is to create a new understanding of identity and bigger identities for people to step into. Last week I wrote a piece called “Examining Whiteness,” which looks at whiteness as an identity that's formed against Blackness.<sup>3</sup> Black people have had their identity contested repeatedly, but also defined for them and us, right? So, there's a lot there. And at the end of it, when I was doing my research, I was surprised to find that a woman, a psychologist, Janet Helms, had created a framework for white identity as a developmental process.<sup>4</sup> It always amazes me how many fields of knowledge are out there that are yet to be discovered.

**DDR:** Oh, yeah.

**CS:** For some reason, when I first saw her name—she was referred to repeatedly by her last name in the literature—I thought it was a guy, a white guy. I thought, Who is this person? Helms turned out not only to be a woman but a Black woman, and one at my old school. She teaches at Boston College! So I thought, A Black woman created a typology for white identity! And when I read about how she did it, I discovered that she had built on a different typology that had come out in 1971, developed by William E. Cross Jr.—one on Black identity, called the *Nigrescence model*. And it was all about integrating your identity in a society that has it in opposition. Both versions comprise five phases each, and both culminate—in terms of development—at a point where you can interact with someone who is different from you without asserting that you're superior. And for the Black person, this means to be able to be free of that kind of framing and interaction—to know how to live healthily in a world that does that to you. And so it's very interesting, this question of identity—and I saw that it is something that psychologists have been taking up because they felt it was important and that they have a role to play. And I thought, Well, why don't we see ourselves as a field that has a role to play in identity? And what are we constructing now, if we take on a role in constructing identity? Would it be beyond



race? Would there be something higher that ties people together around liberatory identities?

**DDR:** To build a little bit off of what you're saying, I want to frame whatever I write very clearly in the understanding that I am building off of and building for additional work, thinking, whatever else can evolve. I spend a lot of time looking at Patricia Hill Collins's work around Black feminist epistemologies, for example. I find myself referring repeatedly back to an article she wrote thirty-six years ago as I think about this work.<sup>5</sup> And it is often the case, of course, that Black feminism in particular is a place where we can go to get a sense of a lot of things—because it has had to orient itself in such opposition to what it is always encountering in the academy, in the world, in the workplace. And one of the things that she talks about and plays with in her work—and I think this is really important—is the notion of *standpoint theory*. The idea that, rather than us starting to develop a sense that our role, our objective, is, as Black feminists (that's her context) to decenter the white male hegemonic order and replace it with a Black feminist frame, let's use standpoint theory as a way to understand that this is *one* way of interacting and understanding the world, *one* form of identity—and that there are many, many other ones as well.

She was pushing against binaries in her work. She says—and I paraphrase—“Don't use what I am proposing here as a world, as the replacement for what currently exists, because that is a problem as well.” That's still the binary—it's still this notion that we have to replace one with the other. It's much more complex and nuanced to recognize and be able to hold the multiplicity around it. And what I want to name—and am always resisting, even in my own work—is that I don't want it to be perceived as arguing for doing away with what has existed and bringing in a new thing that is the complete opposite of it. Because, for me, that doesn't necessarily move us forward. It gets us another frame that's valuable, but it also has its own potential shortcomings, its own foibles. And it keeps us in that same binary, either/or construct that we're trying to push ourselves out of and push through.

And to be quite honest, one of the things that I find in organizational spaces right now—that is, I think, a developmental process—is that the calling out of white supremacist

culture is being used as its own kind of bludgeon. It's becoming now its own orthodoxy, and so everything has to line up in that way. So, if something in any way checks that box, it's bad, and we need to get it out of here. But that's not necessarily the world I'm in. My lived experience, my history, is complex. For instance, I was educated in a variety of institutions, some of which were white, and for me there is value in a lot of the knowledge that I developed at those institutions. What I am trying to challenge is the notion that this is the default and the only way, and that it is the one that has to be honored as *the* form, and in opposition to any other form of knowing and knowledge and ways of being in the world. And I'm presenting these Black freedom struggles as a worldview that has had to evolve in constant reaction to—in relationship with—that dominant frame.

So, it's not the way out, but it is a way forward. What can come next can only come next if we allow for something that has not been allowed, has not been given space to really, *really*



*“What can come next can only come next if we allow for something that has not been allowed, has not been given space to really, really breathe.”*

breathe. When I think about organizations, they're still not giving space to breathe. I keep finding as I write and read, such as in pieces I've seen at NPQ, that folks have recognized that a lot of the ways in which organizations have tried to address the conflicts and crisis is by finding Black folks to become the leaders. And what they find again and again is that this puts those Black folks in a very vulnerable place. They're often pulled in multiple directions, because not only do they have to be the leader of the organization—the face of it—but also have to respond to all the crises within it. And it's not a fair place to put them. So, knowing that, this sort of superficial transition of power to a different body isn't the solution; we have to dig deeper. The problems are the systems, the operating principles—the more foundational stuff that I think historically has never really been touched. We don't really like to go beneath the hood and really dig in and figure out and ask ourselves, "Why do we do it this way?"

How I see that showing up primarily right now is in many ways centered on the question of how we organize ourselves as an entity. And so you're seeing a lot of folks contesting the model of hierarchy that organizes and cements power in this very concentrated place at the top of the organizational chart. People really want to contest that and find out what are the distributive ways in which we can organize ourselves. Which, again, leads us back to, What are the most recent iterations of Black freedom struggles demonstrating to us? What are other forms of leadership models, other forms of organizing, that we can learn from?

Not to say that Black freedom struggles are the only ones that have done that. I think a lot came out of Occupy that was really fascinating. I think anarchist movements are important, which is why I refer to [David] Graeber and [David] Wen-grow's new book *The Dawn of Everything*.<sup>6</sup> I think this book is so transformative. And it's because it presents the notion that our accepted ideas around how hierarchy has to be the guiding principle for all organizing structures isn't necessarily true. There can be other ways that we can be together, and for our organizations to succeed. But we have to be willing to test things out a little bit, and I don't know if folks are comfortable with that yet. I know they're not comfortable with it yet. Because we have all been socialized to believe that the only ways that we can possibly move anything forward is

through the models that we have been steeped in—which is to say, that there's somebody at the top making all the decisions. And what organizations are finding—and what I think young folks are asking for, leaders are asking for, people of color are asking for—is *something different*. We want to try something different. We don't necessarily know what that's going to always look like, but we know that this thing that we have right here doesn't feel like it's nourishing us organizationally, and it doesn't feel like it's serving us professionally and personally. What else can we try?

And that's all it is: a question. It is an opportunity. And some folks will feel that as a threat. And naturally, whenever power is contested, people do feel threatened by it. But I'd see that as a way for a sector like ours to lead. It's to lead and in many ways to *not* be the ones to lead this. I think it's showing up—it's gonna show up all over the place. But it's a call to leadership.

**CS:** I like that you use the word *multiplicity*, because that's one thing that I've been exploring as one of the five characteristics of Edge Leadership. This idea is something that I'm very committed to—that you don't have to choose between one or the other, and that everyone doesn't have to agree on the same thing. There's really no need for that most of the time. And it's interesting, because I was going to ask you, "What does it mean to be Pro-Black? And what are the characteristics of a pro-Black organization?"

And in terms of how you're talking about it, it kind of overlaps with this generational question, with the question of hiring. In a conversation we had in late January that you were a part of—about generational conflict in this work—Black leaders were felt to be at the forefront of a sectorwide challenge. And this is something that [Michael] Hardt and [Antonio] Negri talk about in their book *Assembly*—that the biggest challenge right now for leaders who care about social justice is the new type of organization that will hold a participatory democracy.<sup>7</sup> And I've been looking at that, because we've been hearing from the field repeated questions around hierarchy. I did my master's in nonprofit management, and my thesis was on alternatives to hierarchy. So, I've been looking at this question for a while, and there are many ways in which hierarchy is a part of nature, and many ways in which hierarchy overlaps with other forms. An author I really like, Caroline

Levine, explores four key forms in nature in her book *Forms*, and hierarchy's one of them.<sup>8</sup> She says that almost never do you find a form by itself; usually they overlap. You have multiple forms in the same space. You might have a hierarchy, and you might have a network. So, this is another way to think about it. There never is just one form. And lately, I've been reading this piece about how we're evolving to a different worldview that also explores this point around structure, and it's articulated as *fractality*<sup>9</sup>—this idea that there is a structure, and that it replicates at different levels, but those levels don't have to be value laden. They don't have to be in an order of value. That they are *all* valuable. So, I guess the question that's intriguing me here is, *Is pro-Black that?*

**DDR:** I think pro-Black *could* be that—but I think pro-Black creates the space for that which needs to evolve to evolve. Pro-Black, to me, is connected to the notion of adaptation. It's connected to, and very much rooted in, the notion of interdependence. It is connected to and rooted in the notion of ideas around vulnerability, and different forms of knowledge and knowing. All of those are invitations to do the exploratory work that is necessary to find out what is next. What I think is true, in my experience, is that one of the barriers to trying these—to allowing, to inviting—is that there is a fixedness that is often aligned and associated with predominantly white-dominant structures, right? That's part of what we are contesting, I think: that this notion of fixedness, of how individuality is centered as the paragon, is the ideal. And what we know has challenged that, and has presented different pathways for something other than that, has lived—at least in the American context—in the bodies and movements of Black folks.

So, again, I am not saying that Black folks have all the answers. I am saying that there are some clues to this new world that I think people are trying to break us into that can be found with regard to folks who, historically, have been trying to break us into a new world *all the time*. And so why would we not try to understand what those folks have done from an historical perspective and gather the things that have helped to sustain and nurture?

Also, there is a trust crisis in organizations right now that's connected to power and connected to structures. Across

organizations—and I hear this from leaders—there's a desperate desire to regain trust, or maybe not even *regain* but *gain* trust. And there's a desperate desire, I think, from people who are in organizations, to be trusted. And when I think about it, I think about how central trust was to organizing resistances to slavery. If I couldn't trust you—if trust wasn't present in our relationship—there's no way we could have organized and built an underground railroad. So, trust is this feature that I think is missing in a lot of organizational contexts, because of the ways in which power has manifested itself and the way power often operates as a means of keeping people out of information flows, a means of concentrating decision-making authority, and a means of centralizing spaces. All those, I think, are features that have invariably been components of the hierarchical structures that have evolved in the Western Hemisphere, in particular. I don't know the entire world, but that's my experience.

Regarding other forms, I've been reading about *wirearchies*. If you look at networked organizations now, it is not necessarily from your manager that you gain your knowledge. You gain it also from your peers, from people who are located in other parts of the country. And that's who you're *wired* to. If you look at org charts, traditional organizations take the form of lines that ladder up. But that's not how people are actually functioning in a lot of these organizational contexts. They're diagonal *here*, they're dotted *there*, they're circling, they're connected.

And I'll never forget this one experience that I had when I was working in an organization. I met with this young man, a young Black man, who didn't report to me. I had a position that was sort of dotted in his world. We didn't have a formal connection, but he and I built a strong work relationship. I was a Black man, a few years older than him, who was in the work; and he was like, “Yo, I want to learn from you and build from you.” After we had spent some time together doing some work, I got a phone call from his boss—also a leader of color, by the way—who said, “Yeah . . . I'm uncomfortable with the ways you-all are starting to kind of interact.” And it hit me—there was a sense that I was disrupting this person's authority, because they were oriented to think that their power and their ability to lead their work was contingent on a kind of strict structure of power and hierarchy. And I was disrupting that in some way. I wasn't doing it intentionally; I was just

building with this person. But that threat was a real thing, because I was disrupting something that this other leader held in deep value. I tried to communicate to them that (a) I'm not trying to threaten you, (b) I think that the work is being enhanced, and (c) this is actually how folks in a networked environment interact: We get information and insight from all over, not just from you who sits as my manager on the org chart. I get it from, maybe, your colleague, or this person over here, or that person—people who we should be engaged with, and who should be trusted and invited in to partner on building something. I think that's what people are craving and asking for, because they're looking for growth and development and learning, and to have more impact in their work. And I think that's a real challenge to leaders.

**CS:** It's interesting that you say it was a person of color. I've had similar experiences, when if I talk about what happened, the person will assume the person's white. And I say, "No, actually, it's a person of color doing this." So it speaks to this idea that pro-Black isn't always the perfect answer, right? It speaks to the fact that this is a project for the sector—and, I think you're saying, pro-Black opens up the space. Because when I think about that leader who you just mentioned, who has that reaction, can you imagine the forces making them feel like that's how they have to be? When do they get the space? And where do they go to design something different? Because when you describe this kind of organization, I try to imagine what that chart would look like, and I think, Who would even know how to build a chart like that? I used to work at a networking organization, so we did actually build things like that. But that's not really how people think of this. And even if you could, how do you fund it? Everything's a question, when you look at it like that. How do we change that at that level, so that the individual leader isn't trying to figure it out on their own?

**DDR:** Oh, my goodness.

**CS:** And, usually, what they have is a peer group with other leaders like themselves.

**DDR:** Oh yeah—trying to figure it out. I identify in this way as well. My training, formal and otherwise, has often been within the very structures that are being challenged. I've been rewarded in many ways throughout my career for having

navigated not the structures that I create or even desire but those that have been presented to me as the only way. And I think this speaks to what is experienced by a lot of these leaders of color. These are amazing folks who've been exceptional in everything that they've done throughout their careers. And now they're in this position of decision making and authority and resources, and they have to raise money, and they have to manage all these people, and they have boards, and they have staff. And they're being asked to do something they've never done before.

**CS:** And that you can't hire someone to do. I mean, can you imagine finding a consultant that could come in, if that was the answer? That could actually come and help build the organization?

**DDR:** There are two things that I find really interesting. I'm working with an organization that has an interim/transitional leadership team in place, and the organization is using the benefit of a lot of vacancies at the leadership level to do some experimenting. And I think that it can be interesting to work in that kind of interim space, because you have people who are wed to an outcome in terms of what benefits the organization and not in terms of their positionality. Their job isn't on the line, because they're very clear that they are practicing in a transitional space, for a six- to twelve-month period, to help bridge what the organization has been and what it needs to become. They can help make decisions in a spirit that's not necessarily connected to being the beneficiary of what happens next.

I think the challenge for a lot of folks is, What happens to me? Where do I go? If we do shift the way we organize ourselves and the structures that we have, what does that do to me? Where do I sit in that? I think these are very important and fair questions to ask. And I don't pretend to say that I have all the answers. But I do suggest that there's something powerful in organizing temporary teams to do this kind of work. In *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wengrow show, through their own research and looking at the historical record, that there were societies that spent half the year in hierarchies and half the year in autonomous kinds of arrangements.<sup>10</sup> And it was often aligned with what the needs of the community were in a given moment in time. Wengrow is an





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archaeologist, and Graeber was an anthropologist—he passed away about a year and a half ago. (Some folks might be familiar with Graeber’s name because he was one of the more visible characters from Occupy. He wrote a book called *Debt: The First 5000 Years* that is really fascinating.<sup>11</sup>) In *Dawn*, Graeber and Wengrow present a notion that challenges the view that once we discovered agriculture and the agricultural revolution began, humans went from being hunter-gatherers to agricultural beings. They’re saying it’s more complicated than that. That it’s more iterative. That there were offshoots of communities that were experimenting with other forms of living and organizing.

So, to bring that back to what we’re talking about, I think about what it would mean for organizations to consider and

play with different organizing structures for different points of a cycle. It already implicitly happens. Cycles and flows already exist within organizations, such as when work ratchets up at one point during the year because it’s a critical fundraising period or a big event is happening or a new program is being introduced. But what I’m presenting and suggesting is, What does the next step of that look like? How might that work more intentionally? So that we go beyond recognizing that, say, this part of the year we’re ramping up or working harder, to *organizing* ourselves a little differently for that period in time—whether it’s for six months, three months, or whatever. And it could be because there are different needs, or different challenges we’re presented with. I know that requires a very high level of organizational intelligence—not individual intelligence, *organizational* intelligence—and organizational awareness and even resources. You can’t do this without resources. But it’s intriguing to consider that there have been social arrangements that have existed where people have consciously adjusted themselves based on what is being presented to them regarding their needs. And folks can say, in this context, “*This* is what we need,” and in this other context, “We need *that*.”

Therefore, this notion of fixedness—that we are this way all the time, at all times—is not the thing we’re going to root ourselves in, because in order for us to have the greatest impact, or for us to survive (which was the case several thousand years ago), we need to shift. And I am saying that I think, in some sense, some organizations—and I think the sector more broadly—are encountering something of an existential challenge.

For the past two generations, the nonprofit sector has been able to say, “We’re always going to get these really talented young folks who come into this space because they want to do good and because they don’t want to go to the private sector, or they don’t want to go into private industry.” What I think has happened, interestingly enough, in the last couple of years—partly because of George Floyd, partly because of Black Lives Matter—is that we are seeing private sector and private enterprise starting to learn that, to attract talent, they have to have an orientation. And then they can draw some of those people in who might otherwise have gone into the nonprofit sector. We’re seeing these companies recruit with



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imagined before.”*

that in mind. I came to this sector because I wanted to do good in the world. Where else would I go?

But I don't think that's going to be the case, moving into the future. I think people are going to see a variety of opportunities and ways in which they can express themselves in the world, and that to do good in the world does not mean having to go into the sector that you and I, because we are children of the Civil Rights movement, grew up believing is the place you go if you want to have impact. I think younger folks are saying, “I can have impact in a lot of places. Moreover, I don't need to get underpaid, get treated X, Y, and Z, get overworked. I can make more money and still have social justice be something that's part of my ethos and identity. It might not show up explicitly as the mission of the work, but it's connected to the work that I'm doing.” I think that's a burgeoning challenge that needs to be named and navigated by our sector.

**CS:** Thank you very much, you've given us a lot here. I have one last question. What would a pro-Black sector sound, look, taste, and feel like to you?

**DDR:** That's a great question. I think that on a very basic level, it would sound like some of the conversations that are happening among leaders of color and in the peer group spaces that are emerging. It would sound like that, where there's this sharing of information, sharing of challenges. There's laughter, there's commiseration. They're finding community with each other, and they're not seeing one another as competitors or as people they need to feel threatened by. They're defining their tribe.

And I think this exists to some extent—and it's kind of emerging because people are demanding it—but it would look like folks being able to show up as they are and as they feel called to show up in their workspaces. I am one who believes there's a time and place for everything. And these interesting questions that people are raising around what professionalism is and looks like, are, I think, at the heart of race and identity—because it's often young folks of color who are challenging what we call “the politics of respectability” that are sort of encoded into us and which we're expected to just assimilate ourselves into. Folks are saying, “Nah, I don't feel like that's necessarily how I need to show up at work to get my job done.” I think that it looks like people being trusted

to have a sense of what's needed but also of what's comfortable and what's connected to impact. Because if it's not connected to impact—if it's not connected to what our mission is—why are you putting it on me? If this is just about me presenting in a way that makes you feel comfortable, then that's something we need to talk about—because my presence and how I show up in the world shouldn't be making you comfortable or uncomfortable. That's not what we should be up to right now.

I think the taste—man, I would have to go more into a space of metaphor for that one. I think it would taste like some kind of fruit that sort of explodes in your mouth, and each bite provides you with something distinct that you never imagined before. You've had that flavorful dish that starts off tasting one way with that first bite, and then the second bite adds another flavor, and the third bite another, and it produces a sensory joyfulness that you want to keep processing. You're



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who we are. That’s  
how we’re built.  
And we want that  
for everybody. . . .  
Freedom is something  
that we have brought  
to this country and  
given real life to. . . .  
That is a part of  
our legacy.*”

not trying to just get to the next bite—you’re really enjoying that bite that’s in your mouth, what’s going down. And that’s something that I would really like to see. Because there’s a lot of haste in the work. A lot of unnecessary urgency pervades. And I think pro-Black space, pro-Black identity, pro-Black work, and folks who are centered in pro-Blackness are very clear—we need to slow down sometimes.

This pace that has been created is unnecessary. It is not required. It does not get us to where we’re trying to go. I think pro-Black is focused around and centered on, Where do we get our rest? So, I love the work that people are naming in social spaces and social media spaces: rest, naps, the nap ministry. I want to lift that up. I think that this is part of what a pro-Black sector would feel like. People can name and get the rest they need—so that they can do the work with full impact and not as tired people doing more and more and more, because they keep being asked to do more and more and more.

The last thing I would add is that when we talk about a pro-Black sector, I would include the folks at the philanthropic level. Pro-Blackness can’t come into being, can’t be manifested, without real coordination, alignment, understanding, space—all the things that I think the philanthropic sector has demonstrated in a very tepid way that it might be open to, but is still moving way too slowly. I’ll close with this: I’ve had three calls in the last twelve hours—each from clients, none of whom know each other, who have received money from MacKenzie Scott. And I think, on one level, it’s really sad that one person in a three- or four-year time frame can have that kind of impact—because it throws a light on everybody else. It means all you other wealthy folks could have been doing more—a lot more—if you would just let go. Release. Release the money, and release the need to control outcome. Let go of this need to feel like because this is your money, you need to be able to determine the outcome. That possession? Folks don’t want that. They don’t need that. That does not drive the outcome. That’s not going to create the kind of world that folks are trying to live in. I bring that into this space because if the *philanthropic* space could just lean more into that sort of trust, into belief, and just release this need to control, so much could get done.

*Black folks don’t want to be controlled. Our history shows we gonna get free. Whatever you put on us, we’re going to find and seek freedom. That’s who we are. That’s how we’re built.*



And we want that for everybody, not just for ourselves. Freedom is something that we have brought to this country and given real life to and brought real, deep meaning to. That is a part of our legacy.

**CS:** Well, Dax, you said it all. Thank you so much. I really appreciate you.

**DDR:** Cyndi, I just want to lift you up before we close this out. I met you just a couple of years ago, and I emailed you out of the blue because I'd read your articles and I had got your book. And I was just so blown away by how you think and the ways you write. I just hadn't seen it. I honestly hadn't seen it. No one I was reading in that space in our sector was writing and thinking the way you were. I'm so glad that you're in the role that you are now, and that you haven't let up in any way. You're just pushing it even further, and you're inviting people like me to be part of this work with you at the edge—whether through Edge Leadership work or in the magazine. I'm just so grateful that you exist. And I think the sector is so blessed to have you be a part of it. Folks need to know your greatness. You are a wonderful, beautiful, generous, trusting,

brilliant human being. And I'm just grateful to know you and be a partner with you in the work.

**CS:** Oh, thank you. I feel very lucky to be here, and to be with people like you, and to make my time here be about creating what we want, for real. So you're part of that. You have been from the beginning. Thank you. Please stay with us. I hope to continue this conversation. I want to host this conversation on pro-Black organizations for the rest of the year. I want this to be the start. And I want to do a call to action to the community. I want people to start really holding space to define this, to get funding for leaders to create these models and these case studies, and to create a reader at the end that collects all the work into one place. That's my goal for the year. So, I hope that you stay with us and that you keep naming this stuff.

**DDR:** Let's do it.

**CS:** All right.

**DDR:** We got this. It's what we do.

## NOTES

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# What It Looks Like to Build a Pro-Black Organization

■ Building pro-Black organizations is a necessity if we are to achieve our goals of liberatory transformation. It requires us to depart from solely challenging anti-Blackness or engaging in DEI efforts that don't seek to shift power. We invite our community . . . to join us on this journey.

*by Liz Derias and Kad Smith*

*Always bear in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone's head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children. National liberation, the struggle against colonialism, the construction of peace, progress and independence are hollow words devoid of any significance unless they can be translated into a real improvement of living conditions.*

—Amílcar Cabral<sup>1</sup>

**A**milcar Cabral, Pan African leader of the Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde national independence struggle, wrote and spoke extensively about the need to fight for tangible, material changes for our communities. For Cabral, the wave of global independence movements by Africans and other (Western-titled) “Third World” peoples was always about returning power from imperialist and colonial forces to everyday people. Today, this aim for social change workers remains the same, if not more pronounced. Our work is always to build power, not engage in ideological debates that only advance a few.





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At CompassPoint (CP), we define power as the capacity (which includes will, resources, time, access, and more) to shape the outcomes of one's circumstances. Our work has been on a six-year-long antiracist path that has led to power building rather than challenging anti-Blackness or building for diversity, equity, and inclusion.<sup>2</sup> As an objective of our racial justice goals, we seek to grow power for our staff (and community) who are marginalized, with a focus on Black women. In February 2019, Building Movement Project released the report *Race to Lead: Women of Color in the Nonprofit Sector*, by senior research associate Ofonama Biu, which surveyed more than four thousand nonprofit staff (women of color made up 32 percent, about 1,280 respondents).<sup>3</sup> It describes the all-too-familiar status quo:

Women of color described being passed over for opportunities for new jobs or promotions, often in favor of white and/or male candidates with fewer qualifications. They observed that men, particularly white men, tended to advance faster—even if they were underqualified—and were given more professional development opportunities. They wrote that directors did not see women of color as leaders and withheld projects and advancement opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

The report yielded three major findings: (1) racial and gender biases create barriers to advancement for women of color; (2) education and training are not enough to help women of color advance; and (3) the social landscape within nonprofit organizations can create conditions that undermine the leadership of women of color.<sup>5</sup> All of these issues require a shift in power in order to transform.

These findings and assertions—and more—are no surprise for BIPOC leaders in the sector; after all, organizations are a reflection of the broader white settler colonial project that drove the genocide of Indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Africans. The colonial project is premised on stripping BIPOC people of the power in their lives. Thus, our social change work must be focused on dismantling the white settler colonial project and building power for all people oppressed by the project's subsequent systems. As a result of building power for Black people, we build power for all oppressed peoples (inside and outside our organizations); that is, when we center Black people, we uplift all people. The Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society's *Targeted Universalism* primer describes this, asserting that when those most marginalized build power to shift policy that benefits them, it has the capacity to benefit other marginalized peoples.<sup>6</sup>

We have experienced this truth at CompassPoint. Our former staff set off on a journey to redefine CP as an equity and social justice organization back in 2016.<sup>7</sup> When we began to move past equity as a frame and introduced a more nuanced pro-Black power stance (surfaced by our former codirector Lupe Poblano), we began to see the potential of understanding and expanding power. For instance, in 2018, we examined dependent insurance coverage for our staff, predicated on the principle of supporting the Black mothers in our organization. In 2022, CP passed a 100 percent dependent coverage provision for all staff, regardless of number of dependents. When Black staff developed an affinity group to build unity and discuss experiences of anti-Blackness within the organization, affinity groups for all staff commenced. Affinity groups have created a critical reflective space for relationship building for participants, for white and BIPOC staff to understand and dismantle their participation in anti-Blackness, and for staff to be able to surface requests to the organization safely. It was our affinity group of coordinators who led the way to CP bringing all our workshops online during COVID and emerging with a how-to manual for virtual learning. These examples and many more have been at the crux of several structural, policy, and procedural changes at CP, including reimagining staff compensation and employee benefits,<sup>8</sup> increased program monies for Black programming (including for our Self-Care for Black Women in Leadership program, which evolved from a program funded internally to one that has so



far graduated five cohorts with the support of multiple funders),<sup>9</sup> and hiring our first Black (woman) executive in CP's nearly forty-seven-year history.<sup>10</sup>

## THE FAILURES OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (DEI)

Examples like CompassPoint's and other organizations' pro-Black efforts provide a way forward and data to help others with their power-building efforts. A good start for an organization wanting to take on pro-Black power building is to redirect one's attention away from two current popular approaches and frames: organizational anti-Blackness and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Organizations advancing the theory and praxis of building pro-Black power include Tides Advocacy, whose mission statement reminds us that "Our Focus on Justice Requires Us to Be Pro-Black Every Day";<sup>11</sup> Equity in the Center, which is partnering with the BIPOC Project to deliver a training titled "Building Black Power: Dismantling Anti-Blackness in Our Institutions and Movements";<sup>12</sup> and Essie Justice Group, which in 2020 took on an intersectionality lens to develop a webinar and tools titled "Black Feminist Institution Building: Employee Policies in the Age of COVID & Uprising in Defense of Black Life."<sup>13</sup>

The presiding concentration on confronting anti-Blackness often requires that Black staff define, defend, and solve their own experiences of oppression within organizations. Using pro-Black power as a frame draws in white staff and staff of color to interrogate their own anti-Black bias, as well as drawing the organization into challenging the systems, processes, policies, and practices, not just interpersonal behaviors or attitudes. It also allows us to center our efforts on solutions that materially shift the conditions of Black people, instead of diagnosing whether anti-Blackness is "actually a problem" within our organizations (a dangerous phenomenon that we see all too often).

Analogously, DEI initiatives often miss the interdependence of organizational components. This is not to say that the many DEI staff and officers who we admire, work with, and champion aren't doing work that is fundamental. It is to say that diversity, equity, and inclusion frameworks and initiatives miss the mark, because they consistently fail to clearly identify the fundamental need to shift power in an organization. In 2019, the *Harvard Business Review* published the article "Does Diversity Training Work the Way It's Supposed To?," detailing the results of their experiment to measure the

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effectiveness of diversity training.<sup>14</sup> According to *Harvard Business Review*, the results (published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*) found "very little evidence that diversity training affected the behavior of men or white employees overall—the two groups who typically hold the most power in organizations and are often the primary targets of these interventions."<sup>15</sup> We would venture to say it is indeed working as it's supposed to—to intentionally *not* shift power. DEI initiatives have ignored the centrality of power, rather heavily focusing on diversity training—among other interventions—as *the* antidote to challenge (interpersonal) anti-Blackness. Additionally, DEI staff are isolated with few resources to do more than address one issue at a time, usually focusing on interpersonal relationships between staff wherever anti-Blackness is embedded.

We are inspired by several alternative approaches and frames to DEI. Namely, we draw from Dr. Angela Davis, who tells us, "If we do not know how to meaningfully talk about racism, our actions will move in misleading directions."<sup>16</sup> The work of building pro-Black power allows us to journey in the right direction to meaningfully dismantle the vestiges of white settler colonialism that produce power disparities in our organizations. We also draw from Aida Mariam Davis (Dr. Angela Davis's niece-in-law), CEO and founder of Decolonize Design, whose article "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion have failed. How about Belonging, Dignity and Justice instead?" clarifies, "The DEI industrial complex came into existence as a preemptive defense to avoid litigation by members of protected classes, particularly under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964."<sup>17</sup>

**We are developing practices around values that our Black staff hold in high regard, such as communalism, self-care, authenticity, distribution of power, transparency, and healing. These practices are our principles, and our principles shape our structure.**

Finally, we rely heavily and unequivocally on bell hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, in which she asserts that in order to shift power, we must examine (1) how power has historically oppressed groups of people who are at the margins (in organizations, this is often BIPOC women and others who hold identities from traditionally oppressed communities), and (2) those who are at the center (in organizations this is often people who hold positions of authority, such as an executive director or a board member).<sup>18</sup> hooks advises that to shift power, we must bring people from the margins into the center. This theory is integrated into all our workshop and training offerings, and has proven invaluable when starting conversations that examine power and privilege.

## **INTERROGATING GOVERNANCE TO CONSTRUCT A PRO-BLACK ORGANIZATION**

Since 2016, CompassPoint has engaged in reexamining our entire organization to dismantle white supremacy. This has required an active and intentional redesign of every detail of CP.<sup>19</sup> In 2020, we stepped more deeply into this liberatory work—that is, we moved beyond equity to build a pro-Black organization. And in 2021, we realized that in order to build a pro-Black organization, we needed a more comprehensive framework. To help us continue evolving our praxis as a pro-Black organization, we developed an organizational model premised on a governance framework. Developing this model has allowed us to live into our core strategy, which is to live

liberation from the inside out.<sup>20</sup> We build structures, cultural practices, business strategies, and approaches to organizational change that bring us and the people with whom we work closer to liberation. We try on practices from the inside so that we can practice and then share what we're learning. At the same time, we study ways in which leaders outside our practice are living into liberation, so that we can bring new learning in, creating a cycle of mutual reflection, practice, and change. We use the definition of governance from the Indigenous Governance Toolkit, which defines governance as “how people choose to collectively organise themselves to manage their own affairs, share power and responsibilities, decide for themselves what kind of society they want for their future, and implement those decisions.”<sup>21</sup> This framework includes several interrelated components: values, principles, structure, decision making, culture, and community engagement.

We are developing practices around values that our Black staff hold in high regard, such as communalism, self-care, authenticity, distribution of power, transparency, and healing. These practices are our principles, and our principles shape our structure—our systems, practices, policies, and procedures. Our organization is structured in three circles that allow for the sharing of power among staff, regardless of titles (a form we experimented with years ago, before endeavoring to build a pro-Black organization, when we explored the holacracy model).<sup>22</sup>

For example, our internal resilience circle, which coordinates all things traditionally understood as “operations” and “human resources,” manages our hiring processes for staff. Equipped with our commitment to distributing power, staff whose titles are “coordinator” or “associate director” in these circles often lead and participate in our hiring processes. Among other things, this builds confidence and a sense of ownership for all staff. This structure directly lends itself to the democratic decision-making processes we embark on at CompassPoint, because using modified consensus on major decisions allows staff—particularly Black staff, who often have little to no space in society to shape their circumstances—to shape the circumstances of the organization. All of this—the values, principles, structure, and decision making—shapes the culture of the organization, which at CompassPoint we articulate as the norms, traditions, practices, expectations, ways of being, histories of being (including Ancestral knowledge), beliefs, and desires

of our staff. It also shapes how we engage with our communities. When we feel misaligned regarding any circle, we take the time to dissect why—often tracing back to our values—and construct a more aligned way forward. And we have found that when we’ve experienced a more aligned way forward, it’s been when Black staff are centered.

All of these components of governance, if done with the values that Black people hold at the center, can go a long way to shaping a pro-Black organization. What’s additionally critical is to constantly build a foundational staff understanding of this governance approach. In fall of 2021, we instituted organizationwide political education; using Cyndi Suarez’s book *The Power Manual: How to Master Complex Power Dynamics*, we engaged in a five-part internal study to dissect power in our lives and our organization.<sup>23</sup> Fundamentally, we all now understand that ongoing political education builds power, because it builds the structural and conjunctive analysis of staff—an essential ingredient for understanding and shaping circumstances. Indeed, political education is fundamental to building a pro-Black organization—just as fundamental as our external workshops and cohort leadership programs that aim to build power within our community of participants.

## **SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS TO BUILD PRO-BLACK STRUCTURES**

CompassPoint designs and delivers intensive cohort leadership development programs, which bring leaders together in learning communities. These programs combine a set of core methodologies, including teaching, peer learning, coaching, and physical practice. In 2021, we launched our inaugural B.L.A.C.K. Equity Intensive, to take the work we did to begin transforming CompassPoint into a pro-Black organization and share it with our community.<sup>24</sup> Twenty-seven participants, organized into nine teams of three, met online for six sessions between February and October 2021. We started with the premise that to catalyze change in an organization, it’s important to have multiple people pushing from within. We aimed to build community, explore equitable structures, ground in a pro-Black political stance, and build agency, all while stepping into our power. We used principles of popular education to create learning experiences that uphold self-determination, democratize participation, and engage everyone as both a teacher and a learner—all fundamental components to building pro-Black power. Popular education,

a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning developed by educator Dr. Paulo Freire, aims to transform society by centering the experiences of everyday people.<sup>25</sup>

A few key tenets embedded in this pilot program will continue to be central to our power-building practice and continued programs and our cohort leadership programs. The tenets are the following:

- **Build intentional community among people who are working to dismantle white supremacy in their organizations.** Meaningful racial justice work is deeply challenging, and can be sustained most effectively when we come together and support each other as whole people—hearts, minds, spirits, bodies—who are actively in the struggle to create pro-Black organizations.
- **Ground in the power of small teams.** This program is designed with an understanding that small teams of deeply connected and aligned people can effect changes in the larger systems around them. The program relies on the power of small teams with diverse perspectives (in both social positioning and organizational hierarchy) working together to more deeply understand the nuances of how their specific organization perpetuates racism, and design equitable cultures, structures, and practices in response.
- **Amplify existing momentum.** All racial justice work has to start somewhere, and the systems of inequalities in our sector are both broad and deep enough that a wide variety of organizational interventions and supports is likely needed to shift the full system. At CompassPoint, we are currently focusing our efforts with teams and organizations where there is already explicit racial justice work underway—linking with folks who are not at the beginning of this journey but rather already on their way.
- **Learn across organizations.** Racial justice work requires multiple layers of learning—within ourselves, among our teams, and within our organizations. Our approach supports these and offers an additional layer—learning from people doing this work in other

organizational contexts—that can sometimes help catalyze areas where a team may be stuck, or help calibrate a team’s understanding of where they are on their racial justice journey, and how their particular struggles are both common and unique. This learning can be deepest and most impactful when it unfolds in an intentional community in which people have been invited to be whole, vulnerable, honest, and openhearted. Sharing directly and deeply about our experiences cross-organizationally opens up a deeper level of learning than does just reading others’ stories or case studies.

- **Challenge traditional dependence on expertise.** We are active colearners in our programs, advancing our own efforts to deepen racial equity at CompassPoint through our facilitation of and participation in this learning community. The CompassPoint facilitation team serves as another, tenth team in the cohort, as we are actively working on our own internal efforts to continue to grow racially just structures and practices while designing and facilitating this learning community. Given this, in addition to the processes named above, we draw from our direct experiences with this work to offer inspiration, support, and practical tools to guide small teams in seeding new possibilities for pro-Black structures and practices in their organizations.

Building pro-Black organizations is a necessity if we are to achieve our goals of liberatory transformation. It requires us to depart from solely challenging anti-Blackness or engaging in DEI efforts that don’t seek to shift power. Inspired by our theoreticians, fellow organizations in the field, and a community of participants, we are committed at CompassPoint to resourcing the time and efforts needed to build pro-Black power in our organization and with our partners and community of participants. We aim to grow and scale the impact of this work, increase its accessibility, and share learnings and tools with more organizations and with the sector more broadly. We invite our community, including the organizations we serve, partners in the field, and philanthropic partners, to join us on this journey.



## NOTES

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**LIZ DERIAS** is coexecutive director at CompassPoint (CP). Derias's work focuses on ensuring that CompassPoint is values driven, sustainable, and ultimately impactful in supporting leaders, organizations, and movements committed to social justice to realize their full power. Derias has over twenty years of national and international social justice, youth, and community organizing, popular education training, and policy and advocacy experience. **KAD SMITH** is the founder of Twelve26 Solutions, LLC. Smith is also a member of CompassPoint's teacher team, and a lead designer and cofacilitator of CompassPoint's B.L.A.C.K. Team Intensive. He is most passionate about changing the material conditions of BIPOC folks across the country. Smith spends a significant amount of his time focusing on civic engagement, political education, climate justice, and imagining the bridging of worldviews across the globe. He currently serves on the board of directors for Berkeley's Ecology Center and GreenPeace Fund USA.

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# Moving the Mountain

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

“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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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.

## 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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# A Journey from White Space to Pro-Black Space

*by Isabelle Moses*

Internal transformation in the direction of racial justice does not occur merely by applying traditional methods. New thinking is required, and the leadership of Black and Brown women is an important part of the equation.

H

ow do you infuse racial and gender equity throughout organizational culture and practice? How do you make it a shared responsibility rather than one person's job?

Not unique to my job or my organization, these are questions that I wrestle with every day. For nearly five years, I have worked at Faith in Action, the nation's largest faith-based, grassroots community-organizing network. I previously served as a management consultant and executive coach to Faith in Action's leadership team, and came on staff to bring that expertise in-house. My current role as chief of staff requires me to think daily about how to build an organization that ensures that Black, Indigenous, and people of color—and Black women and women of color, in particular—are set up to thrive. A large part of my responsibility is working with our leadership teams to address our internal systems and structures that have perpetuated inequities and inhibited our team from fully living into our talents and aspirations.

One might like to believe that an organization like ours—one that has a fifty-year track record of building power in low-income communities of color across the country—might have had a head start in this area.

Not so.



**As an organization, we have  
grappled with the truth that systemic  
racism is the fundamental obstacle  
to our collective liberation.**

The reality is that Faith in Action, like many historically white-led organizations, has had to undergo its own internal change process so that our organizational leadership and staff teams truly reflect the communities in which we live and work. As an organization, we have grappled with the truth that systemic racism is the fundamental obstacle to our collective liberation, and when we really grappled with that truth, our whole organization had to change to reflect the aspirations we have for society.

This challenge is hardly unique to Faith in Action. Like many of our peers, we have experienced the consequences of shifting to more intentionally recruiting and hiring leadership and staff of color without fully addressing underlying systemic inequities. These inequities often inhibit us from thriving when we're offered opportunities we haven't been offered in the past.

When I was hired, it was largely because of organizational failings in this area. By the middle of the 2010s, Faith in Action, which back then was called the PICO National Network, might have been practicing "race-conscious organizing" externally, but internally the transformation had yet to fully manifest.<sup>1</sup> We were hiring more frontline staff of color, but when it came to the organization's leadership, even five years ago this was still a white-led nonprofit, including a majority of the board of directors.

We have come a long way, but we have hardly figured it all out. Our journey includes both the lessons we are learning and many open questions.

And given the scale and scope of our network, it is an important story to tell. The Faith in Action network operates in

twenty-seven states, El Salvador, Haiti, and Rwanda. Our network includes forty-five affiliated federations that are independent organizations. Our national organization collaborates with federations by offering leadership development in the form of training and coaching, political analysis, and deep partnership in developing and executing organizing plans and strategies. We also raise and regrant millions of dollars each year. We focus on a range of issues, including voting rights and voter engagement, immigrant justice and citizenship, and economic and criminal justice.

### **THE DAM BREAKS**

In the spring of 2017, a group of fourteen Black directors—all of whom had leadership roles with national staff and affiliated organizations of the Faith in Action network—gathered in Dallas, Texas, for a retreat. The agenda was designed to focus on opportunities for collective fundraising. But this would prove to be no ordinary fundraising retreat.

During the discussion, several Black women raised a red flag: In recent years, a disproportionate share of Black women had quit or were transitioned out of affiliated organizations or national staff in the network. The conversation shifted to the question of how a faith-based, grassroots community-organizing network lives its values and ensures that Black women and women of color more broadly are set up to thrive—knowing that when Black women are thriving, it's more likely that everyone is thriving (as the theory of *targeted universalism*, developed by Dr. John A. Powell, articulates<sup>2</sup>). It became clear that, while fundraising still mattered, understanding and addressing the experiences of Black women was an even higher priority.

As the Black directors explored the catalysts behind the departures of Black women, several demands of the leadership of national staff emerged. These included: carrying out an external assessment of the state of Black women across the network; hiring a human resources director to instill values-aligned systems and practices; ensuring access to professional development for Black executive directors; adding a Black woman to the executive leadership; addressing racial and gender disparities in allocation of regrants from the national organization to affiliates; and creating a Wisdom Council to bring restorative justice practices to personnel (and other) conflicts that arose within the network.



**We are striving every day to create  
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I joined Faith in Action's national team soon after this retreat. My position was in large measure a response to a call from Black directors who wanted to see greater focus placed on setting Black staff up for success, especially Black women. Over time, my role evolved to become the director of organizational development and, more recently (as noted earlier), chief of staff.

My own path to Faith in Action was somewhat unusual. I completed an MBA degree—not your typical training for a community-organizing network—and spent the first couple of years of my postgraduate career in management consulting with for-profit corporations, identifying opportunities to increase profit or operational efficiency. Getting laid off in the middle of the 2008–2009 financial crisis was the wake-up call I needed to recognize that a job that contributed to racial and economic inequity was not for me. For the past decade, I've supported strong and vibrant organizations at the leading edges of racial and economic justice. While Faith in Action still has a long way to go in our process of becoming, we are striving every day to create an internal culture that lives our values of justice, power, and love.

**NEW LEADERSHIP SETS AN  
AUDACIOUS VISION—AND OFFERS  
A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION**

Faith in Action had been led by two white men—first, Father John Baumann, the founder of then-PICO, and second, Scott Reed—for its first forty years. Both had many accomplishments. At the same time, Reed's retirement opened up space for new leadership and new thinking. In May 2018, Rev. Alvin Herring was hired as the network's new executive director and the first Black person to lead the organization.

When Rev. Herring arrived, the organization faced a number of issues. Among these were:

- Financial challenges
- Women of color throughout the network feeling slighted and unseen
- A culture of silos without shared vision and direction
- An unwieldy national network that had grown out of existing systems and structures

- A need to reshape governance and develop a collective approach to organizing that centers wisdom and lived experiences of people of color

One of Rev. Herring's top priorities was to take the time to deeply listen to the pain of Black and Brown women on staff who felt that our contributions to the organization were undervalued. The network engaged a consultant to complete a report on the state of Black women in the organization that sought to understand the underlying themes behind the disproportionately high rates of turnover of Black women, both on national staff and within our federations. (More recently, we have completed a similar study with our Latinx staff.) Our organization took all of these actions because we believe that to change organizational culture, we first have to understand it.

After the initial listening round and about a year into his tenure, Rev. Herring set an explicit goal that Faith in Action would become the best possible place to work for people of color. This was not a small declaration.

The last three years have been all about moving from vision to implementation. This meant a comprehensive effort to transform the culture of the national staff team through self-examination around race and gender, and riding the national momentum that is asking leaders to operate with greater accountability to the communities we care about. The vision offered by Rev. Herring has guided much of our approach to ensuring that our organization lives our values.

Several changes have been implemented regarding national staff over the past three years:

- Strong fiscal responsibility and a renewed focus on fundraising have propelled us to the healthiest balance sheet we've had in the organization's history.

## It's about considering every day how to design an organization for liberation and not oppression.

- People of color now serve in all seven positions on the executive team (five women, two men).
- To recognize the leadership and talent that already resided in the organization, key staff of color who had labored in the network for years received significant promotions. This freed up long-tenured team members who weren't always in positions of power and influence to bring their deep learning and ideas to life.
- Throughout the organization, we have implemented the Zulu concept of *sawubona*. Literally, the phrase means, "I see you," but more broadly it means an organizational commitment to respecting our common humanity.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, within the network, more than half of our affiliate organizations are now led by people of color, of which a high percentage are Black women and Latinas.

The goal, in short, has been to shift from a white-dominant and patriarchal culture to one where more people of color, especially women, have access to decision-making rights and influence over the continued evolution of both *what* we work on and *how* we work collectively. It's about considering every day how to design an organization for liberation and not oppression.

### ORGANIZING HUMAN RESOURCES AS IF PEOPLE MATTER

In this process of internal organizational transformation, we are learning many things. One perhaps obvious—yet sometimes hidden—point is the need to recognize that racial trauma affects a large portion of our staff. This means we have found that we need to intentionally create space for healing and well-being. This has many practical human

resources implications that community organizing networks—and, dare I suggest, other nonprofit and for-profit organizations—ignore at their peril.

Our chief people officer, Crystal Cumbo, has been a steadfast champion of this work. In response to the set of requests from Black directors, she also joined the national staff as the first human resources professional in our organization's fifty-year history. She has made it her mission to ensure that Faith in Action practices its values through our organizational systems, structures, and policies. For example:

**Compensating staff equitably.** One of our big wins over the past eighteen months is the completion of a compensation and benefits study, so that all staff are paid equitably and competitively relative to the market for similar positions at similarly sized organizations. This was a huge feat and required the participation of the entire team in order to complete updated job descriptions that would serve as the basis for analysis. Ultimately, we landed on a new compensation framework that has structured salary bands by job function and guarantees that people who perform similar work are paid similarly across the organization. We are also ensuring that staff are paid at least at the median of the market. Due to our recent financial turnaround and strengthened balance sheet, we are also able to make salary adjustments to account for any inequities that emerged across our team.

**Prioritizing staff well-being to avert burnout.** During the pandemic, we have made every effort to prioritize staff well-being and to make sure that our annual leave policies were not a barrier to staff getting the time off they needed. This builds upon our long-standing commitment to family-work integration that we piloted in 2019, with a practice of no meetings and no emails on Fridays.<sup>4</sup> While we aren't perfect at this, the program has greatly increased our team's ability to slow down, reflect, and handle personal priorities.

We've regularly surveyed our staff during the COVID-19 pandemic to hear feedback about what's working and what additional supports are needed to ensure staff well-being. As a result of the feedback, we closed the office for a total of four weeks in July and December 2020 and January 2021, so that staff could recharge and focus on themselves and their loved ones. And in 2021, we decided to implement a

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two-week holiday break in December (adding a second week to our usual holiday break), and have codified this as a standard practice going forward. Rather than pushing just a little bit harder, we recognized the need to take the foot off the gas, and that addressing burnout *required* time to recuperate. Ultimately, we believe that we will liberate ourselves *if* we create the conditions for everyone to stay in the work over the long term rather than creating conditions for constant churn in the mode of treating people like disposable parts. With the support of a diverse and dynamic leadership team, we can express our liberation by owning our ability to choose rest over work.

#### **Investing in leadership development and caucus spaces.**

This meant engaging leadership development practitioners to support our leadership teams. It also meant working to strengthen our caucus and cohort spaces, including our Black caucus, Black women's caucus, Latinx cohorts, Asian Pacific Islander (API) Caucus, and white caucus.

One of my proudest bodies of work over the last two years has been stewarding our Black women's caucus space to codesign and implement a curriculum focused on supporting Black women to own our power more fully while also healing harmful societal conditioning that has uniquely impacted Black women through the intersection of misogyny and racism, known as *misogynoir*. We engaged Dr. Chaniqua Walker-Barnes to understand and unlearn many harmful aspects of the StrongBlackWoman archetype as described in her book *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*.<sup>5</sup>

Phyllis Hill, our national organizing director, has worked with Black women directors and organizers in the South to cocreate the Black Southern Women's Collective, which is a space for collective visioning, fundraising, professional development, community building, and healing. In this space of shared leadership and imagination, they have developed a strategy that recognizes that organizing is both about meeting the needs of everyday people in response to crises (such as in the aftermath of hurricanes) and about building long-term political power for Black and Brown communities (as demonstrated by high rates of voter turnout in Georgia during the November 2020 and January 2021 elections).

#### **THE NEED FOR NEW THINKING**

The shift that has occurred at Faith in Action would have seemed impossible when I joined the organization five years ago. We have been working hard to walk our talk: centering the voices of those closest to the impact of issues we work on, both in our externally facing organizing as well as in our internal organizational practices. We are striving daily to move toward a deeper emphasis on self-determination and collective liberation. We are aiming to center the wisdom and experiences of people of color, especially women of color, at all levels of our organization.

This includes learning from organizing ancestors who look more like us—including Ella Baker, Cesar Chavez, and Fannie Lou Hamer—rather than only operating out of the frameworks of white organizers, such as Saul Alinsky. It also includes incorporating wisdom from living systems—such as that shared by adrienne maree brown in *Emergent Strategy*.<sup>6</sup> How do we move more like a flock of birds and share nutrients more like interdependent tree roots?

Since joining Faith in Action, my beliefs around organizational systems and structures have shifted significantly. I have begun to realize that many of the capitalist-oriented models and practices I was trained to implement were not working for our aspirations. For example, how do we think about a long-term shared vision and shorter-term goals that are defined more at the team level than at the organizational level? How do we hold healthy tension between the elements of “top-down” hierarchy that are needed for clear decision making, while also responding to the “bottom-up” wisdom of our grassroots leaders?

Recently, in response to the receipt of an unexpected transformational grant from MacKenzie Scott, Rev. Herring tapped Denise Collazo, our chief of external affairs, to lead a network-wide commission to inform how best to use the funds. This is a first step toward taking on the challenge of engaging many stakeholder groups (grassroots leaders, network and national staff, and boards) across language, distance, and many time zones in more democratic decision making. Here are the commission's three overarching recommendations:

- Become the global spiritual and political home for BIPOC people and our coconspirators who aspire to build multiracial, multifaith democracies
- Invest in a new generation of community organizing leadership by amplifying the voices of Black and Brown women across the globe
- Make this money make more money

It seems they're off to a great start.

In short, internal transformation in the direction of racial justice does not occur merely by applying traditional methods. New thinking is required, and the leadership of Black and Brown women is an important part of the equation. There remains much work to do. We recently wrapped up a listening campaign to hear from leaders and clergy in our

global network to build our vision for the next ten years around our collective wishes and aspirations.

*We know that Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous communities have the insights about what we need to thrive. Faith in Action wants to activate and equip people to be the authors of our own liberation. We believe wholeheartedly that we are the ones we've been waiting for.*



## NOTES

1. See Steve Dubb, "National Network Leader Looks Back on 40 Years of Community Organizing," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, May 2, 2018, [nonprofitquarterly.org/national-network-leader-looks-back-40-years-community-organizing/](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/national-network-leader-looks-back-40-years-community-organizing/).
2. "Targeted Universalism," Othering & Belonging Institute, University of California, Berkeley, accessed January 22, 2022, [belonging.berkeley.edu/targeted-universalism](https://belonging.berkeley.edu/targeted-universalism).
3. Valeria Sabater, "Sawubona: An African Tribe's Beautiful Greeting," *Exploring Your Mind*, last modified November 15, 2021, [exploringyourmind.com/sawubona-african-tribe-greeting/](https://exploringyourmind.com/sawubona-african-tribe-greeting/).
4. Denise Padín Collazo, "Tackling Family–Work Integration Head-On to Keep Women of Color in the Work," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, August 20, 2019, [nonprofitquarterly.org/tackling-family-work-integration-head-on-to-keep-women-of-color-in-the-work/](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/tackling-family-work-integration-head-on-to-keep-women-of-color-in-the-work/).
5. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).
6. adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).

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# Pro-Black Is Pro-Everybody

## A Conversation with Cyndi Suarez and Isabelle Moses

“If you start to pay attention to all of the things that Black women do to make an organization successful, and then you provide resources and support for that work . . . then you learn how much more people actually need in order to thrive in organizations . . . . And if Black women are thriving, everybody is thriving. That’s our fundamental belief.”

*In this conversation between Cyndi Suarez, the Nonprofit Quarterly’s president and editor in chief, and Isabelle Moses, Faith in Action’s chief of staff, the two leaders discuss what pro-Blackness means for individuals and communities, and what a pro-Black organization looks like.*

**Cyndi Suarez:** I’m excited to talk to you about Faith in Action. I know you’ve been working on the organization’s transition for a while now, and I’d like to ask you some questions about that. But the aim of this conversation is to dig into pro-Blackness more generally. I want to put a finer point on what pro-Blackness means for people at different levels. So I’d like to start by asking you what pro-Black means to you in general, beyond organizations in the sector.

**Isabelle Moses:** This is such a big and important question. I’ll answer in the context of Faith in Action—since it’s where I’ve had the opportunity to experience the question in a workplace setting—and also in the context of where I live.

I live in Detroit, Michigan. I’ve been here for about four and a half years. And one of the reasons I moved here was to be grounded more in Black culture. I grew up in a supersocialized, white context in San Francisco, going to private schools. Then I lived in Washington, D.C., for a long time. And I wanted to have a more rooted experience in Black communities. And Detroit, I felt, was a place where I could have that experience of being somewhere that really values and centers Black culture as just everyday life. I felt like I hadn’t had that experience before. I’m Black, I grew up in a Black family and in a majority-Black neighborhood, but I was shipped out of my neighborhood to go to school, shipped out to schools across

the country. So, that sense of rootedness in Black community is something that I have been longing for. Unfortunately, the pandemic has set that back for me in some ways—because I learned that I don't actually have deep roots in Detroit, either, after two and a half years. You know, that takes time.

All this is to say, the reason I'm starting with Detroit is that it's the beginning of my personal grounding in Black identity and recognizing that "Black" is not one thing. I was a bit socialized around the notion that there's one way to be Black, particularly in majority-white spaces. Otherwise, you're going to be stereotyped as "one of those Black people," you know? It took my moving to Detroit to recognize the nuances of Black identity in a more powerful way and to internalize that I can be Black however I want to be Black.

**CS:** So, pro-Black means being rooted in that identity and community.

**IM:** Well, for me as an individual, yes. And it means connecting my identity, my lived experience, in a way that feels grounded. I've learned that it takes more than just having Black skin. What I've learned, at least for myself, is that because of the era that I grew up in—the colorblind era, the eighties and early nineties, when folks were embracing this kind of assimilation mantra—I needed to reclaim my identity as a Black person. Because the frame that you're asked to assimilate into is obviously a white normative frame. Reclaiming my identity as a Black person who was taught to assimilate into a white context has been a body of work for me. So, the bottom line for me is that I have to start with being pro-Black and embracing the mantra *Black is beautiful*, which wasn't always normalized, growing up.

**CS:** It's interesting hearing you describe this. It reminds me of my daughter, because she grew up here, obviously in a Black family and a Black neighborhood, but she also went to very elite schools, and she's had to navigate that. So, with all that said, what does a pro-Black organization look like? What does it mean to you? I know you've tried to build one, so I imagine you have a lot to say about this.

**IM:** Well, I think it starts with making sure you've got Black leadership. We operate at Faith in Action under the belief that if you take care of Black people, specifically Black women, everyone in the organization will be taken care of—because the needs of Black women in particular are often so overlooked. And Black women are expected to be the providers, the caretakers, the folks who do things without actually ever being asked, and a lot of that labor goes unseen, unrecognized, unappreciated. And if you start to pay attention to all of the things that Black women do to make an organization successful, and then you provide resources and support for that work to be compensated, to be appreciated, to be recognized, then you learn how much more people actually need in order to thrive in organizations.

And when you meet those needs—when you create space for people to take care of their families during the workday; when you create space for people to take meaningful vacations so that they get actual rest; when you create the conditions for really strong benefits and policies, so people's healthcare needs are provided for (and they're not worried about whether they can make their doctor's appointments on time, because they know that they have the time off to do that); when you create an environment where people aren't going to be pressured to deliver things at the last minute, because you build in time and space for thoughtful planning, so it doesn't end up on somebody's plate (often a Black woman's)—then you can create an organization where Black women can thrive. And if Black women are thriving, everybody is thriving. That's our fundamental belief.

**CS:** It's interesting that you said it has to start with Black leadership. So, an organization that doesn't have Black leadership wouldn't necessarily be pro-Black, even if they have Black staff?

**IM:** I have a hard time seeing how folks who aren't Black can understand what Black folks need in an organization. Truly. And how they would be able to resource it at the level that's required. That doesn't necessarily mean the top people all need to be Black; it just means you have to have meaningful representation of Black folks in leadership, in

order for that ethos to get rooted all the way through the organization. I've worked in organizations where there were Black staff, but we didn't have enough power for things to change.

**CS:** Right. And I want to get into this more, because I know that you've been doing this work at Faith in Action, which is actually a network. What are the biggest differences that you've seen since you started making this kind of transformation? What are the changes that you're seeing that are the most meaningful in terms of the difference between *before* and *after*?

**IM:** I think one of the main things is how we relate to each other just on a day-to-day basis. When I started with Faith in Action four and a half years ago, it was a culture that had become toxic, for lack of a better word. I hesitate to put it like that.

**CS:** That's what they are sometimes. It's the truth.

**IM:** And I think it was because caretaking how relationships were evolving was not something that people were always paying attention to. And I think when you start to really pay attention to how people are actually feeling and how people are experiencing the culture—and you create space for conversations around that—you learn things that you might not have been seeing, because you were more focused on the work or something.

**CS:** Like what? Can you give an example?

**IM:** Well, I was hired at Faith in Action in large part because there was a lot of turnover of Black women staff both nationally and networkwide. And people started to ask the question, "What is going on?" And I do think it stems from this movement that organizations go through on the spectrum. You start with diversity—"We want more representation; we want more people who look like the people we work with every day in our organization." So, you hire folks, but you don't necessarily create the conditions for those folks to be successful. And so that's where you're moving toward inclusion—"Okay, I have a seat at the table, I can say what I want

to say, and I feel included"—and equity—"My needs, which might be different from your needs, are being met." And I think when you're in the earlier stage of this evolution, organizations experience a lot of churn, because they haven't created the conditions for the folks that they've hired to succeed. When Faith in Action was in that place of hiring folks who were not set up for success, and we experienced the churn, we had to stop and ask, "What is going on? What needs to change for folks to feel supported and well-resourced in order to do their best work and, ultimately, stick around?" Because if you're in the business of movement and societal change, and you're constantly churning people, you don't make any progress. You're barely treading water. You're possibly drowning. And you can't win on the things that you care about with that type of churn. We were feeling like we couldn't move the needle on the issues we care about unless we paused and figured out how to take care of our people and resource folks in order to be able to stay in the work for the long term. And we're starting to see some early signs of results of that shift, whereby some pretty-long-tenured staff who've been able to ride this wave have been given the power to hire the teams that they want and to figure out what strategies we need—and they are excited. And for the folks who are tired, we're figuring out how to send them on sabbatical so that they can come back refreshed. We don't have to burn people out. That does not have to be the mode.

**CS:** That's really interesting. I like that you highlight the churn as an indicator of where you are. Of course, we see that, but I've never heard it articulated that way. And I'm also hearing you say that you're really flexible in terms of your organizational policies, and are aiming toward giving people sabbaticals. These are things that are considered to be very exclusive. Usually only senior people get sabbaticals, and very infrequently. I think I've only worked at one place that had sabbaticals. Can you say more about that? How do you decide to do these little things that can actually make a big difference, and that are not common?

**IM:** At Faith in Action, you have to be on staff for at least ten years before you're eligible for sabbatical. We have enough long-tenured staff that that's quite a lot of people. Over the last few years, we've had about one person a year





taking a sabbatical, just so as to minimize the impact on the organization as a whole. But now we have a backlog of people who are eligible, so we need to create a sabbatical schedule so that everyone who's eligible gets their turn in a way that can still minimize disruption overall.

**CS:** And how much time do they get?

**IM:** Depending on what they need, anywhere from three to five months. And they can put together a plan for the time. Our colleague Denise Collazo used her time to write a book, *Thriving in the Fight*. Denise has been organizing for twenty-five years and is now our chief of external affairs. And she talks a lot about how that sabbatical was one of the ways in which she got the space that she needed to do the reflection for that book. So, she was able to use that time off to get clear about how it was that she was able to stay in the work.

Denise was an innovator of our Family–Work Integration program, where we strive to reduce meetings on Fridays and limit email. It's not a day off, but it is a day that you can use to meet whatever needs you have—to catch up on any work from the week that didn't get done, or sleep in a little and go to a gym class, or take your mom to a doctor's appointment, or take care of that errand that you've been meaning to do—so that you don't end up feeling like there's no time for those activities that are really important for one's well-being. If you center well-being, then you create more opportunity to do better work.

**CS:** I love that. It's interesting, because people often think that you won't get good work if you do that. But you're saying that you're seeing more good work from having these policies.

**IM:** Absolutely. And people are happier. We have a much happier culture. Some evidence, for me, is that a consultant we recently hired to project manage a big event that we're organizing, said to me, "I see how hard you are all working to practice different kinds of cultural norms than what you would typically see in an organization [your size]. . . . I can feel it." We're trying really hard to center people as human beings—not as, like, widgets. She needed to take her son to an appointment, and I said, "Oh, yeah, no problem, we'll just reschedule." And she said, "Really?" Or, you know, you can

*When you're in  
the earlier stage  
of this evolution,  
organizations  
experience a lot of  
churn, because they  
haven't created the  
conditions for the  
folks that they've  
hired to succeed . . .  
if you're in the  
business of movement  
and societal change,  
and you're constantly  
churning people,  
you don't make  
any progress."*



be late to an appointment because of a thing you need to do. No problem. If there's good communication, then do what you need to do. And you don't have to pretend you're doing something else. We can hold space for each other's humanity.

**CS:** Is there anything that you want to do that you haven't gotten to do yet at the organizational level?

**IM:** Well, we want to make sure that our teams are resourced. With the gift that we got last year from MacKenzie Scott, we now have the resources to make sure that people can work reasonable hours. If there's a gap in the organization, we can create a job description and recruit for it. We don't have to operate out of scarcity; we can operate out of abundance. And that's so exciting. I think our organization is going to grow, and that we'll have more opportunity for impact. We have an aspiration to be the global spiritual and political home for people who are seeking communities of belonging and want to create the conditions for our democracies to actually work for all of us—which we know is not true right now. And, you know, as people of faith who don't necessarily go to church every Sunday. I identify as a person of faith who doesn't go to church every Sunday—I feel like I get a lot of my spiritual needs met at work, which is super awesome for me. And I feel like I don't have to go to church if I get my spiritual needs met at work.

**CS:** Ah, that's interesting. How do you get that? How do you get them met at work?

**IM:** We have these beautiful rituals. For example, that project manager I mentioned who's come into our culture has been amazing. She's totally figured out that one of the ways we build community is through check-in questions. We recently had an hour-long meeting with twenty-five people, and we spent twenty-five minutes of the meeting with everyone calling in the ancestor that they wanted to bring into the space, and then we spent thirty-five minutes getting all the business done that we needed to do. And when you spend twenty-five minutes hearing each other's personal stories, that's a way of centering Blackness, centering Black culture, and centering the fact that we are more than the people in this room. We are all the people who came before us. We are

all of the wishes and aspirations that our ancestors had for us, and often have exceeded those. And it was really beautiful. It was emotional, how much people were sharing about how proud we are to have potentially exceeded our grandparents' or great-grandparents' expectations—for the work that we're doing, the way we are living in the world, the opportunities we have that they never had but for which they created those stepping-stones so that we could step into these opportunities. And when you really create space for that conversation it builds community, it builds deeper trust, it builds deeper relationship, and it allows for better conditions for the work. And then you can spend thirty-five minutes doing the work, instead of spending an hour potentially griping about the work and not actually getting the work done. Because you have started by creating conditions for a powerful conversation.

**CS:** You know, it's funny, I experience that as well. And I think of it as a people-of-color way of being. You don't do anything until you talk about the family and how things are—there's the whole personal aspect. I remember years ago when I was doing organizing, and it was when I was starting, and I was in a Latinx neighborhood. And I remember it took so long, because everywhere I went, I had to come in and sit down to eat or something. I couldn't get them to just give me the information I wanted. And it's very different, when you go to a meeting and there isn't that kind of tradition. If you go to Puerto Rico, where my family's from, it's the same. The relationship to time is very different. It's more fluid, it's more qualitative. It's not as quantitative—you know, you have to start at this time, and you have this much time. I never thought about that until now—how the way that we use time and hold meetings is very culturally based.

My last question to you is about the field, in terms of the sector. What does a pro-Black sector sound, look, taste, feel like?

**IM:** That's a hard-to-answer question. I'm going to take a detour here. You wouldn't be hearing about Donald Trump talking about white men feeling like they're the victims of racism. It's not that.

**CS:** You wouldn't be hearing that?

**IM:** You wouldn't be hearing that. Pro-Blackness isn't a zero-sum game. It shouldn't be seen as anti anything else. I think right now there's this kind of binary orientation. But I think we need to understand pro-Blackness as a way of saying pro-everybody—and by that I don't mean the equivalent of “all lives matter”! What I do mean is that if you're pro-Black, you are actually pro-everybody, because you can't be pro-everybody if you're not pro-Black. So, if everyone felt comfortable saying, “I'm pro-Black” (because that's the only way to know that I'm actually pro-everybody), and if everyone's organization lived that, you could hold different kinds of cultural value systems in harmony with one another, not in competition with one another—where people feel free to run meetings the way they want to, because they're doing it out of their authentic expression of their own identity, versus, “This is the way I was taught at business school, and that's the only way to do it.” I think you can create space for lots of different ways to be. And, ultimately, Black identity has historically been the most marginalized—so, if you don't hold space for that identity to be centered, then you do create these kinds of false binaries.

**CS:** I was talking to a big funder a few weeks ago, and they wanted to talk to me about power, because it's one of the things that they're centering. I think it's a mostly white organization, whose mission is to support grassroots movements, but they don't really talk to grassroots people. And they're very concerned about having to give up power. So, when you say that being pro-Black doesn't mean you're anti something else, that it doesn't take anything away from others, it brings that conversation I had to mind. Also, I was doing an interview earlier today with someone who said, “You have to figure out what you are willing to give up.” So, I keep hearing this as almost a wedge—it doesn't mean you have to give up anything, but some people think that you *do* have to give up something. Can you say more about this?

**IM:** I guess it depends on what people value, what they perceive as giving up versus not giving up. So, if people value having the top job, and if that's a zero-sum thing—where the only way you can express leadership or power is by being the

top of whatever the food chain is, or the apex predator, so to speak—then yeah, you might feel like you're giving up something. But if you can reframe what it means to be powerful, then I think we have a chance. So, if we can reframe the conversation around power—where it's just as powerful to give away money as it is to be the CEO of something, or it's just as powerful to think about, Okay, how do I take all my privilege and apply it? I mean, I know I hold a certain amount of privilege as a fairly well-educated Black person with an upper-middle income doing grassroots community-organizing work in an infrastructure-type role, and I've decided to apply my privilege to creating conditions for our organization to thrive. I thought to myself, I can apply my skill set to creating more conditions for more profit-centered organizations to make more profit—which I used to do—or I could explore how I actually really think about organizations. Because I love organizations—I think organizations are dynamic, interesting, living beings. And if I apply my privilege toward that, I'm giving up on maximizing my profit potential as an individual. I could go make a ton more money in the corporate sector. I'm choosing to give that up, because I believe that I will get so much more back through this contribution in this way.

So, it just depends on how people think about what the trade-offs are. And I think if we can collectively reframe the trade-offs, then we get closer to creating more conditions for more people to thrive—which, in my opinion, is way more rewarding than having the most money that I could possibly have for myself.

**CS:** I'm intrigued by what people say about this, because it is a point of tension. Another question I have is around this concept that the Black community is the most marginalized. Because when we started to develop this edition on building pro-Black organizations, we heard from Native people who were like, “Why? Why Black people?”

**IM:** That's a fair point.

**CS:** I remember being at a conference a few years ago, and there was a sheet that was given out that had this gradient of how marginal people were, and that was the point of contention: whether Native or Black needed to flip or not. It was a big thing. So I'm wondering how you would answer that. The



*There's pro-Black, and then I think what we at Faith in Action tend to say more is, there's centering Blackness in the context of a multiracial vision for society. So, I think we try to find the nuance there, so that pro-Black is seen as part of a bigger constellation of folks who are part of it."*

way I responded to these questions regarding this edition was, "We are inviting you to support pro-Black, just as we invite Black people to support pro-Indigenous." And that was enough, but it was a very interesting challenge. I'm wondering if you see that tension, and what you think about it.

**IM:** I think it's a totally fair question. And in our organization, while we believe very much in being pro-Black, we don't necessarily start with that language. We really believe in building a multiracial coalition of the willing, so to speak. And we very much see Native American communities as part of that—and to your point, there are contexts in which anyone can win the oppression Olympics, right? There are contexts when not just Native folks, not just Black folks, but Latinx folks have been really, really marginalized in our society. So, I guess I'm less interested in the oppression Olympics aspects of it and more interested in how we actually take the original sin of America—which is a combination of genocide and slavery—and *together* think about how to create conditions for people to thrive. We don't have as many Native folks in our community of the coalition of the willing as we would like. We would like to create a bigger tent and for more people to see themselves as part of it, as part of this movement we're building. And when we talk about Indigenous communities, we're not just talking about U.S. Indigenous communities; we're talking about Indigenous communities all over the world.

**CS:** Is Faith in Action global now?

**IM:** We have activities in El Salvador, Rwanda, and Haiti. And we have opportunities for expansion in other parts of the world, too. So, yeah, ultimately, we do have a vision for being even more of a global organization than we are today.

**CS:** That's great. Is there anything else you want to say about pro-Blackness?

**IM:** Yes. There's pro-Black, and then I think what we at Faith in Action tend to say more is, there's centering Blackness in the context of a multiracial vision for society. So, I think we try to find the nuance there, so that pro-Black is seen as part of a bigger constellation of folks who are part of it. At Faith in Action, we're trying to find ways to talk about it so that Latinx



folks and white folks and everybody can see themselves as contributing to this vision that we have for the world that isn't just about pro-Blackness but about recognizing that the Black experience is a particular experience that we need to pay attention to.

**CS:** Yeah, I've heard from Latinx people who've written for us saying that we're covering a lot of pro-Black stuff and not enough Latinx stuff—and I'm thinking, Well, those are not mutually exclusive, but okay.

**IM:** Yeah, we're trying to thread the needle. A big part of our work is immigrant justice and pathways to citizenship—which is not just a Latinx experience, obviously. But we see that as an important pillar of democracy building—making sure that

everyone who lives here contributes to our society, has a right to say how our society's major decisions get made. And so we want to make sure that we're thoughtful about that.

**CS:** Thank you so much, Isabelle. I wanted to dig into these particular levels of pro-Blackness and start to define them a little bit more—so, I appreciate this conversation.

**IM:** Thank you, Cyndi. It's great to connect. Take care.

**CS:** You too.

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# What If We Owned It?

by Darnell Adams

There are many purposes to dreaming, and there are different kinds of dreams. Some dreams hold longing—a vague memory of what once was that can sustain one through hard times. Then there is the kind of dream that leads to action, activated when the conditions are right. Like a seed that sits dormant until the rains finally come.

The story of Black co-ops and alternative economics in the United States is one of violence and persecution—but it is also a story of hope and determination. The history of Black cooperative economics and its leaders has remained largely—and intentionally—hidden from view; but that knowledge has been brought back into mainstream awareness with the 2014 publication of *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*, Dr. Jessica Gordon Nembhard's gargantuan work of gathering and remembering the histories of Black communities that, despite the ongoing threat of violence, practiced economic cooperation throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Bolstered by this renewed understanding, many BIPOC communities are creating their own paths for liberation and healing by focusing on the solidarity economy in its many forms. And Black co-op leaders across the country are playing a key role in innovating new solutions to address the old systemic challenges. One space in which this is happening—the space of food co-ops—is experiencing something of a renaissance.

## ORGANIZING FOR SOVEREIGNTY

*I want to know safety and joy more than I know about pain and anxiety.*

*I want wholeness, Black love, held equity based on a membership model, infrastructure that builds an economic base; resources that are not moved into hierarchy but into the streets.*

—Erin Dale Byrd,

Fertile Ground Food Cooperative, Southeast Raleigh, North Carolina





For over a century, Black people have organized and run food cooperatives, farm cooperatives, cooperative schools, insurance mutual groups, and credit unions. Why has this history been lost?

Wanting to take a closer look at the emergent Black leadership in the food cooperative movement, I spoke with nine colleagues, representing six co-ops from around the country. I posed the question “What does organizing for sovereignty look like?” This led to deep reflections about the underlying nature of the communities they are working to support.

Black Americans have always relied on cooperative economics for their survival. Cooperative economics in Black communities has demonstrated the potential not only to provide for individual needs of food and shelter but also to play an important role in the development of political agency within the community. In his book *Economic Co-Operation Among Negro Americans*, W. E. B. Du Bois described how groups of enslaved people would work together to save enough money to buy individuals out of slavery.<sup>2</sup> Citing Du Bois and Frederick Douglass, Nembhard writes, “For two centuries they did not earn a regular wage or even own their own bodies, but they often saved what money they could and pooled their savings to help buy their own and one another’s freedom (especially among family members and spouses).” In addition, Nembhard writes:

Du Bois notes that the African American “spirit of revolt” used cooperation in the form of insurrection to establish “widespread organization for the rescue of fugitive slaves.” This in turn developed, in both the North and the South, into “various co-operative efforts toward economic emancipation and land buying,” and those efforts led to cooperative businesses, building-and-loan associations, and trade unions.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, the Freedom Quilting Bee project offers a beautiful example of how cooperative economics works.<sup>4</sup> In 1966, a collective of Black women in rural Alabama—under the leadership of Estelle Witherspoon—founded the Bee to support local people who lost their income and/or home after registering to vote.<sup>5</sup> These quilts, made during the winters, were sold in stores like Bloomingdale’s and Sears and exhibited at the Smithsonian Institute. With the money

raised from the sale of the quilts, the collective was able to buy twenty-three acres of land in 1968 to build a sewing factory where it could produce more quilts. The collective sold eight lots to farming families who had been evicted from land they rented from white landowners; it leased part of its building from 1970 to 1996 to a day care center; and it became a member of the Artisans Cooperative. In Syracuse, New York, a group of women opened a store called the Bear Paw specifically to sell the Bee’s quilts and other products the Bee had expanded to making, such as place mats, aprons, and pot holders. Until 2012, when it closed after the passing of the last original board member, Nettie Young, the collective continued to develop products and explore new enterprises.<sup>6</sup>

For over a century, Black people have organized and run food cooperatives, farm cooperatives, cooperative schools, insurance mutual groups, and credit unions.<sup>7</sup> Why has this history been lost? In an interview with Laura Flanders, Dr. Nembhard offered the following insight:

It was dangerous, especially in the South. Your stuff could get burned, you could get lynched. Why? Because you’re being either too uppity by trying to do something on your own, or because you’re actually challenging the white economic structure. And you weren’t supposed to do that. The white economic structure actually depended on all these Blacks having to buy from the white store, having to rent from the white landowner. So they were going to lose out if you went and did something alternatively.<sup>8</sup>

### ***The Emergence of Black Food Co-ops***

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the sabotage of Black cooperative practices has shape-shifted from acts of overt violence to less visible forms of obstruction. In terms of Black food cooperatives, the latter takes the form of an industry development model that uses data to exclude the communities that are most in need of access to healthy and nutritious food. Meanwhile, food



As with many other lack-of-access issues—employment, healthcare, transportation, clean water—lack of access to fresh food is a racialized and well-documented problem that has been decades if not centuries in the making.

cooperatives and community-supported food systems become ever more necessary. Grocery stores have either pulled up stakes or altogether avoided Black and Brown communities, creating a long-standing issue regarding access to fresh food.

This is not a new phenomenon. As with many other lack-of-access issues—employment, healthcare, transportation, clean water—lack of access to fresh food is a racialized and well-documented problem that has been decades if not centuries in the making. According to a 2014 Johns Hopkins University study, “[at] equal poverty levels, Black neighborhoods have the fewest supermarkets.”<sup>9</sup> This problem has pushed neighborhoods to address the root causes and create businesses owned by the communities and designed for the benefit of the communities.

Mikaela Randolph, Board Chair of SoLA Food Co-op in South Los Angeles, reflects on this point:

We are the recipients in our community of not having an adequate amount of grocery stores. So, when you’re talking about food access and sovereignty, it’s like freeing ourselves from limitations. Because we are limited in our immediate community of South L.A.—which is actually really large—with respect to having adequate access to, adequate quality of, foods—and we also have high incidence of comorbidities: high blood pressure, diabetes. We see dialysis centers popping up in our communities, and not grocery stores—right?

The standard development model currently used to determine the viability of a food co-op relies heavily on data regarding household income and, inevitably, skews the outcome toward more affluent communities. A common (not publicly shared) calculation included in these market studies is aptly titled the “Natural Foods Propensity Score.” The calculation highlights who is likely to purchase natural foods, and where those people live. Based on census data, this score has reinforced an assumption that for a co-op to

be successful, it needs to be situated in middle- to upper-middle-class communities. Why this assumption? The models and business development frameworks for co-ops have largely focused on predominantly white, middle- to upper-middle-class college-educated communities.<sup>10</sup>

As recently as five years ago, developers were saying that they didn’t have the data to support development of food co-ops in areas like South L.A.; Dayton, Ohio; Detroit, Michigan; Cleveland, Ohio; and Southwest Raleigh, North Carolina. To this assertion, Black co-op leaders across the country have been responding: “If you don’t have the data, we’ll figure it out ourselves.”

Exploring ways to solve for the specific needs of their communities, Black co-op leaders have asked, “Does the majority of food in a co-op need to be natural—in other words, minimally processed—or can there also be selections of conventional foods that are more processed but less expensive?” Five or six years ago it was a radical notion that a co-op could have a large percentage of conventional or “clean conventional” foods—foods that have been processed using minimal chemicals or perhaps none, but which have not undergone the expensive process of being certified “organic.” The decision to bring in conventional foods alongside natural and organic foods is one way that Black co-op leaders are innovating the co-op model to address the challenges of their communities.

We are seeing a remarkable shift in a short period of time. This past summer, Gem City Market, founded in 2015 in Dayton, Ohio, opened a 12,000 square foot full-service grocery store offering everything from fresh produce to a hot food bar.<sup>11</sup> They lean heavily toward local foods but also have a large array of conventional and clean conventional foods.

Reflecting on the increase in the number of food co-ops currently organizing in the United States, Stuart Reid, executive director of the Food Co-op Initiative, says: “We can go back five years, but before that there were relatively few

One thing that's become clear to many Black co-op organizers in the food cooperative movement is that they are ready for this time, *because they have been doing the work all along*.

active [Black-led] start-up efforts. We started seeing more inquiries around the time that Renaissance [Community Cooperative] was making news, and it has continued to increase, with a major bump after the combined impact of COVID and George Floyd's murder."<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, over the past two years, forces operating within and around us have brought us all to a full stop and opened the space for reevaluation. One thing that's become clear to many Black co-op organizers in the food cooperative movement is that they are ready for this time, *because they have been doing the work all along*.

## HEALING FOR SOVEREIGNTY

*Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality. Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits. Trauma in a people looks like culture.*

—Resmaa Menakem<sup>13</sup>

In 2017, I was the project manager of a start-up food co-op in Boston and responsible for community organizing and business development. One morning, I was standing in line at a local coffee shop, when a Black woman approached me and started yelling, "What are you doing working for a bunch of white people who are just trying to gentrify this community? How dare you even do anything for them?" Everything around us came to a halt.

My first reaction was confusion. I remember thinking, What is she saying? What is happening? My second reaction was curiosity. I thought, I'm just going to listen to her. I knew her anger couldn't be personal, because she didn't know me. I took a breath and let her say the things that she needed to say.

When she was done, I said, "Thank you. But I disagree with you. I'm the one who's managing the project." I explained that the cooperative was owned and controlled by the community members for the benefit of the community members, and that the rumor of a "white lady" who owned the co-op

was untrue. What was true was that there were a few white ladies on the board. However, this was a collective effort emerging from the community that would benefit from it.

Our exchange ended on a note of calm. "I just hope you know what you're doing," she said. I told her that I was glad that we got a chance to talk.

In the two and a half years that I worked to organize this food co-op, I was met with curiosity and enthusiasm but also distrust, frustration, and anger. I heard and felt the mistrust about the project, especially around the idea that it was a white, gentrifying project. At community meetings, members expressed anger that nothing ever seemed to change.

I have been hesitant to write about such experiences, because I do not wish to contribute to the narrative that Black folks are broken. I do not believe that. What I do wish to acknowledge is that the terror that lives within us from generations is both in the past and the present. But it is not our only story. To the degree that there is trauma, there are equal amounts of strength, creativity, and love. If this weren't the case, we would not still be here. If there were only trauma, there would be no hope, no dreaming. I have come to trust that speaking to the trauma that is present is helpful in healing. To acknowledge what is present can be used as a springboard to building a culture that gives people more opportunities to thrive.

In *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, somatic therapist and trauma expert Resmaa Menakem writes about traumatic retention: "Oppressed people often internalize the trauma-based values and strategies of their oppressors. These values and strategies need to be consciously noticed, called out as traumatic retentions and challenged."<sup>14</sup> Menakem notes: "Another fairly common traumatic retention is a reticence to own a home or a business, or even to be part of a start-up food co-op. It's not hard to see how people whose ancestors were considered property

would not be delighted by the concept of ownership.”<sup>15</sup>

While organizing in a community that had been historically disinvested, I found myself straddling the vision of the future and the multiple realities of the past and the present. There were indeed many concrete examples that folks shared with me about promises of adequate economic investments that seemed never to come. Community input about predatory practices that led to loss of homes and businesses also didn’t appear to be valued or was outright ignored. Based on these truths, it was absolutely rational to be reticent to enter into a community business venture like ours. The traumatic and sometimes violent past was not so long ago as to be disconnected from the present.

### **Completing the Action That Was Thwarted: Moving through Trauma**

*In therapy a traumatic experience is sometimes described as an attempted action that got thwarted and became stuck in the body. A common first step in the mending of trauma is completing the action that was thwarted. This releases the trauma energy stuck in your body. You can then use this energy to metabolize the trauma.*

—Resmaa Menakem<sup>16</sup>

Co-op organizing requires action. It requires the coming together of hundreds of people to not only imagine a new future but also move oneself and marshal all resources over a span of many years—in the form of outreach, networking, community meetings, door knocking, political maneuvering, capital raising, and self-governance. Action is key to mending the trauma. As Menakem writes,

In the healing of intergenerational trauma, you may also complete an action that was attempted and thwarted by a traumatized ancestor. The trauma got stuck in their body, and then passed down to you. Even though you may be cognitively unaware of this trauma—or of your ancestor’s experience and incomplete action—your own efforts simultaneously heal your trauma and release future generations from its grip.<sup>17</sup>

Leaders in the Black food co-op movement have been speaking to the different manifestations of intergenerational trauma that are undermining Black communities. These leaders understand that healing in communities is not just about economic opportunities and access to nutritious food

but also about providing a sense of safety and dignity to the shopper and worker. It’s this experience of sovereignty that leaders in this movement are working to provide.

The food co-op leaders I spoke with, while deeply entrenched in the day-to-day aspects of organizing and opening a cooperative grocery store, also spoke about love of self, love of others, and healing from trauma. I was struck by the complexity of their vision—one that made space not only for economic thriving but also for the physical and mental well-being of their communities, and which often spoke explicitly, if indirectly, to this neurobiological understanding of how integral stuck, interrupted action is to trauma that doesn’t get healed, even across generations.

For Kenya Baker, director of Unified Power, Co-op Dayton, a key question is what to do with the trauma. “How do we release it?” she asks. “One of the things our community has started doing is healing circles. We come together with other community members. Not to drink, not to smoke, not to party, not to kick, not to gossip—but to deal with our trauma. To process trauma. To release it.”

Unhealed trauma can lead to distrust and resistance when it comes to genuine community development. Baker spoke to the resistance she encountered while building support for their project.

We’re not used to seeing development in our community, so immediately the thought is, it’s not for us. But that’s part of the self-hate. Because we don’t believe we deserve it. We have never done it for ourselves. I had so many naysayers from the community who were Black nationalists, or Black organization leaders. And a lot of them, I’m really proud to say, are now members of the grocery store. But it was a process. I tell people this grocery store is a community-led development. If it is to remain a community-owned and -led development, you must get engaged. Three days after we opened, the president of the NAACP called me and said, “I think I’m ready to get my membership.”

As Janet Howard, board member at the Fertile Ground Co-op, noted, “Our experience in America has led us to all of this distrust, and to easily lash out at our own rather than finding the source—which would amount to being in conversation with political leaders about how they disinvested from our community.”

In organizing to create a cooperative—in the unknown places where there is no one roadmap—all the community’s wisdom, gifts, and skills are needed.

Given the context in which Black communities are organizing cooperatives, it is not surprising that healing from trauma is not far from the minds of Black co-op leaders—in particular, the practice of visioning the space, and the processes of group learning and striving. Information gathering—the gaining of new knowledge—is also a route toward healing. Common Share Co-op Board President Kinga Walker-McCraven described ways in which to create the space for people’s trust and engagement to emerge. She sees it as a process of growing capacity within individuals and community.

One thing that I’m working on right now is really diving deeply into each person’s personal values, strengths, talents, and natural gifts that we can highlight and affirm, and help them to grow even deeper and find their place. It really does come down to each person being able to really sink into who they are, what they offer, where they’re comfortable. I want to develop that in our board and in our community, so that we have a high-functioning community of people.

Baker adds:

You have to have a level of faith, because it makes dreaming safe. COVID slowed things down a lot. It gave people an opportunity to reimagine—because these structures that create obstacles for people to be able to self-determine were dreamed up and put in place by man. This is our opportunity to reimagine and then cocreate, with our brothers and sisters, what we want our future to look like.

In *My Grandmother’s Hands*, Menakem writes about “clean” and “dirty” pain:

Experiencing clean pain enables us to engage our integrity and tap into our body’s inherent resilience and coherence, in a way that dirty pain does not. Dirty pain is the pain of avoidance, blame and denial. When people respond from their most wounded parts,

become cruel or violent, or physically or emotionally run away, they experience dirty pain.<sup>18</sup>

Menakem offers a process in which a traumatized body can move through pain “cleanly.” One step is to “stay present and in your body as you move through the unfolding experience with all its ambiguity and uncertainty, and respond from the best parts of yourself.”<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, moving through trauma is not only an emotional and mental journey but also one of activation of the body. In organizing to create a cooperative—in the unknown places where there is no one roadmap—all the community’s wisdom, gifts, and skills are needed. In this coming together, this building of relationship, this learning together and making decisions together, comes the opportunity to heal from our collective trauma—to complete the thwarted actions of our parents, our great-grandparents, and beyond.

## **BUILDING FOR SOVEREIGNTY**

Food co-ops focus on addressing the immediate and long-term needs of their communities. This provides the framework for alternative business practices to those of traditional grocery stores. Co-ops place emphasis on job creation, procuring products from local producers, and having proactive policies to minimize environmental impacts of their operations. These business practices have a multiplier effect that filters through the local economy. Indeed, the data tell the story: “For every \$1,000 a shopper spends at their local food co-op, \$1,604 dollars [sic] in economic activity is generated in their local economy—\$239 more than if they had spent that same \$1,000 at a conventional grocer in the same community.”<sup>20</sup>

Building a community-owned food co-op requires intensive business development—as one might expect with any multimillion-dollar business—but co-ops are unique, in that they have international guiding principles that are of great benefit both to start-up co-op business ventures and those that already have their doors open. “Co-operation Among



## DEVELOPING A FOOD CO-OP: 7 PRINCIPLES

The consumer-owned food co-op model requires not just business development but also community development. As with many business ventures, coming up with a solid business plan with strong pro forma (financial forecasting), obtaining capital, and assembling a team that can execute the operations are key steps. The development of a food co-op is a process that requires the community to invest its time, energy, and skills for as long as five years to learn about cooperatives, spread the word, create the governance and business structures, and sell equity shares.

It's a complex endeavor, and one that requires communities to marshal their resources to reach their goal. The co-op exists way before the physical store is built: to sell equity shares in the business, it must incorporate. Co-ops begin to organize before the incorporation. How else would you know if people want a co-op? So, those conversations—the sharing of ideas, dreams, and possibilities—happen for a long time during the process. The co-op development process itself is a master class in power, relationship building, self-determination, and how to share information. Thankfully, there is guidance—guardrails on how co-ops should conduct their work.



### Seven Internationally Recognized Co-op Principles of the ICA (International Co-operative Alliance)

#### 1. “Voluntary and Open Membership.”

Co-operatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.”

**WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE:** In adhering to this first principle, food co-ops cast a wide net for those who can join and participate. Importantly, the choice remains in the community members’ hands—choice for oneself, as in self-possession: the power to decide one’s involvement, level of risk, and reward.

#### 2. “Democratic Member Control.”

Co-operatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. [Individuals] serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote).”

**WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE:** For consumer cooperatives, boards are elected by membership, and any member in good standing can run for the board. Big decisions that will tangibly affect the co-op and by-

law changes are voted upon by membership. Can this get messy? Yes. Democracy can be a messy process. However, the board works on behalf of the membership. Members have the power.

#### 3. “Member Economic Participation.”

Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-operative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.”

**WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE:** In a nutshell, the money is put to use for goods, services, and employment that the community needs. But this principle is not meant to function in isolation from the co-op principles and values. Indeed, shared social aspirations and needs are just as important.

*continued next page*

#### 4. “Autonomy and Independence.

Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.”

**WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE:** The members and the cooperative are the primary beneficiaries of the cooperative enterprise, both in terms of the services that are provided and eventual surpluses. The cooperative is a community asset. The shareholders are in the community—not an outside corporate entity. The co-op members are agents of their own business venture. They determine what they wish it to accomplish and how it will be accomplished. The promise of cooperative business is that a business of scale can be built and run with the community needs at the center. For many Black and Brown communities, this is often not the case, with ownership residing elsewhere and profits siphoned off for the benefit of others.

#### 5. “Education, Training and Information.

Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operative. They inform the general public, particularly young people and opinion leaders, about the nature and benefits of co-operation.”

**WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE:** Some cooperatives have an open (accounting) book system and extensive training for staff, so there is not only financial transparency but also the opportunity for broader input, business planning, and problem-solving from the team. In all cooperatives, the business is required to give regular financial reporting to the board and to the co-op members. Board members often need financial training to understand financial statements. For start-ups, extensive cooperative training for organizers takes place for years through organizations such as the Food Co-op Initiative, CooperationWorks!, state-run cooperative development offices, and a variety of cooperative associations such as the National Black Food & Justice Alliance.

#### 6. “Cooperation among Co-operatives.

Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional, and international structures.”

**WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE:** This principle guides the behavior and support within the cooperative sector. In this way, while a particular food co-op is a highly autonomous business, it fits into an ecosystem where folks from other communities work in support of one another. One organizer from Raleigh will call another organizer in Detroit to share how they went about acquiring a site for the store or how they capitalized their project. Documents are shared, advice given, ideas copied—so much so, that the sharing has been lovingly referred to as “P6-ing.” This is important. This work is hard, and it is almost impossible to go at it alone. Autonomous, yes; alone, no. For communities healing from years of folks either swooping in with solutions derived from outside the community or from not having access to larger networks with information and resources, Principle 6 is a remarkably different and healing way to do business.

#### 7. “Concern for Community.

Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.”

**WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE:** The relationship of the co-op to the community beyond the members of the co-op is important. Relationship building goes beyond the point of organizing to grow membership: It also requires care and thoughtfulness regarding what is important to the neighbor next door who chooses not to become a member or shopper, to the business viability of the farmer and fair treatment and appropriate compensation of farm workers, to those who are fighting to keep housing affordable.

*The seven principles as laid out here were adapted from Guidance Notes to the Co-operative Principles, (International Co-operative Alliance, 2015). You can find the full, original guide here: [www.ica.coop/sites/default/files/2021-11/ICA%20Guidance%20Notes%20EN.pdf](http://www.ica.coop/sites/default/files/2021-11/ICA%20Guidance%20Notes%20EN.pdf).*

Co-ops”—the sixth principle of the guide “7 Cooperative Principles,” decrees that co-ops support one another by providing technical assistance and capital through local, regional, national, and (sometimes) international structures.<sup>21</sup>

Further, there is an ecosystem of food co-op development supports, such as the nonprofit Food Co-op Initiative (FCI)<sup>22</sup> (whose mission is “to increase the number, success, and sustainability of new food cooperatives delivering access to healthy food in diverse communities across this country”) and the National Co-op Grocers (NCG), which “exists so that member co-ops are successful, and the total cooperative grocery sector grows in size and scope.”<sup>23</sup>

Gerardo Espinoza, executive director of the Local Enterprise Assistance Fund (LEAF),<sup>24</sup> a national lender that focuses on cooperative businesses and housing, considers food co-ops to be “the best of both worlds.” Food co-ops have “both the kind of support that a major corporation like Star Market has *and* have the autonomy and independence and flexibility of an independent grocer.” What he means is that large supermarket chains have corporatewide processes and systems that maximize efficiencies that are out of reach for smaller, independent stores. But for communities starting a food co-op, a whole support system is in place regarding “what point of sales I should buy, what refrigeration equipment [I should] buy, how to do the merchandising, how to do the member campaign, how to negotiate the lease,” notes Espinoza. This support, he affirms, reduces risk, which is extremely important for sustaining small businesses.

In addition to this ecosystem of support, there is the strength of the community ownership itself. The sustained volunteer effort and the matrix of cooperative support systems have helped to provide business stability, making food co-ops a viable option for many communities wanting to address food-access issues and for providing an economic boost to those communities.

Yet, building a cooperative grocery store is a daunting task that requires years of effort and significant capital to make the dream a reality. This effort includes predevelopment costs that support:

- business planning and market research;
- deep learning of governance systems;

- enormous community-organizing efforts;
- cost of real estate;
- hiring of architects and store planners;
- purchasing of equipment;
- hiring of staff;
- and stocking of shelves with food.

JQ Hannah, assistant director of the Food Co-op Initiative, reports:

To compete in these times, start-up food co-ops must not only do excellent organizing pre-open but also open very professional grocery stores that are excellent shopping experiences. Because of this, the full cost of opening as a start-up generally ranges from \$3.5 million to \$5.5 million, depending on the size and scope of the store. These costs are not only showing no sign of coming down but are rising rapidly.

So, despite the benefits that communities can derive by owning a food cooperative, there are many obstacles, especially with regard to funding. Randolph highlights this tension, pointing out that our system is economically structured so as to discourage and impede small-business ownership.<sup>25</sup> “That can be really disheartening,” she says, especially because “if we were able to go back to a cooperative model” then this would meet “so many different needs” for so many communities—needs that otherwise remain unaddressed. Randolph pointedly asks: “Why aren’t we funding that more? Why isn’t there more federal funding? Why isn’t there more state funding and local funding?”

While co-op members put in a certain amount of equity, there remain sticking points for getting needed capital, especially when it comes to traditional lenders. A food co-op has hundreds of owners, and no one person provides a personal guarantee. In addition, in a situation where a store is having difficulty repaying a loan, in most cases the value of the collateral, such as the refrigeration and shelves, are not worth enough to cover the amount of the loan. This can be a full stop for traditional lenders. Espinoza elaborates:

I think many people are surprised that even the government sometimes is not flexible. For instance, with the SBA [Small Business Administration], I believe that it’s only relatively recently that they have been willing to consider worker co-ops as a small business. But even though it’s a small business, it’s still requiring

“Are the projects that are funded projects that are trying to make this fundamental shift in power? . . . Or are these groups just trying to reform conditions within a system where the people who are in power are still fundamentally in power?”—Malik Yakini, Detroit Black Community Food Security Network

collateral. So they made progress, but not the progress that is needed. For me, it's always fascinating how a government organization—which should be the first in line to support this type of initiative because of all the characteristics of wealth distribution, and so on—is not at the table. So, that would be one instance of flexible capital—or, in this case, *inflexible* capital.

The vision is not just to open a store but also for that store to grow and thrive—to become an economic engine, create dignified jobs, and, of course, provide access to healthy food. To have all of those things become a reality, the store needs to function well in the first few years until the point of being profitable, and then continue to grow—sustainably. Not having enough cash on hand in those early years can be a fatal blow in an industry that runs on between 1 and 2 percent margins. A high debt load with immediate repayment is equally detrimental.

Patience and flexible capital are necessary financial conditions for a food co-op's success. Those two concepts must be intertwined to be effective. Impatient investors needing quick returns would tend to siphon off very-much-needed cash from the new store. Flexibility may need to look like seeking other ways of measuring risk and/or willingness to restructure a loan if there are challenging financial conditions. Funders such as LEAF, Cooperative Fund of New England, Shared Capital Cooperative, and The Working World understand the unique nature of cooperatives and strive to support them with patient and flexible financial tools.<sup>26</sup>

Grants are also an important part of the capital equation, particularly in lower-wealth communities. Co-op members in communities already struggling financially may be limited in the amount of equity and loans they can provide. Grants can fund those hefty predevelopment costs, increasing the chance of a shorter and more successful development process. And, importantly, grants can also be used as part of how capital stacks up to fund the store.

John Guerra, director of retail and store development for National Co+Op Grocers, underscores this point:

It's important, in terms of starting up, to have capital to actually bring to the table—to say [to banks and other investors], “This is the money [we have] to spend on this thing [the co-op].” That's important to show, in terms of community support. But also, you have to have 20 to 30 percent just to get banks to come to the table. In terms of equity, I would say grants can often function in that same way.

Grants that support organizations whose mission is to support food cooperatives, such as FCI, are yet another piece of the financial puzzle. They have the line of sight and expertise to assist organizers in the many places across the country where communities have decided to take on this vision of sovereignty by sharing the responsibility, risk, and eventual benefit of a cooperative.

As communities respond to the growing need for more access to food and for spurring economic development, many are turning to the cooperative model as a viable way to bring goods and services to areas abandoned or ignored by traditional grocery stores. For funders whose missions support fundamental shifts in power, the cooperative movement may align with those aims. Malik Yakini—cofounder and executive director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and board member of the Detroit People's Food Co-op—astutely asks:

Are the projects that are funded ones that are trying to make this fundamental shift in power, which will ultimately give more autonomy and sovereignty to people? Or are these groups just trying to reform conditions within a system where the people who are in power are still fundamentally in power, and are still making mega-profits, and we just have a kinder and gentler capitalism? And so [funders must have] some kind of clear analysis themselves that this isn't just about, you know, minor reforms, but about a



fundamental shift in power: *the fundamental shift in how resources are distributed*. And then [funders must try] to identify those groups that are striving for those fundamental changes, as opposed to those groups that are doing just the kind of window-dressing reformer things.



There are many purposes to dreaming, and there are different kinds of dreams. Some dreams hold longing—a vague memory of what once was that can sustain one through hard times. Then there is the kind of dream that leads to action, activated when the conditions are right. Like a seed that sits dormant until the rains finally come.

As food apartheid continues to plague Black and Brown communities, and food cooperatives and community-supported food systems become ever more necessary in communities across the country, Black co-op leaders are engaged in both kinds of dreaming. They are remembering and honoring the dreams of the lineage of organizers upon whose

shoulders they stand as they move forward in action by learning together and supporting each other—particularly through the National Black Food & Justice Alliance, which holds regular virtual meetings for members.<sup>27</sup>

Back when I was working to organize that food co-op in Boston—sitting in community meetings, door knocking, going to City Hall, and talking to economic development people—I had this vision of what we were all working so hard to accomplish together:

*It's a new building, built on the footprint of what had been a business many decades ago. When I walk in, I see a cross-section of the neighborhood, from the folks stocking fresh produce to those ringing up the groceries. The shelves are full. Prices are fair. Bright colors are on the wall, and a large sign greets me: "Everyone Welcome." I recognize these folks, even if we've never met before. They look like me. It's a grocery store envisioned by community members who asked, "What if we owned it ourselves?"*

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## NOTES

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# Measuring Is an Act of Power

## A Call for Pro-Black Measurement and Evaluation

*by Titilola Harley, Angela N. Romans, and Candace Staniel*

■ To be relevant and authentic in capturing the dynamism of and empowering real sustainable change in our communities, those who practice measurement and evaluation must shift the power . . . to those who are most closely experiencing the problems we are trying to solve.

■ In order to measure something, one must have a “standard”: an agreed-upon yardstick, so to speak, by which things are evaluated and compared. When measuring is extended from the concrete (say, the dimensions of a room in a house) to societal applications (such as measuring the social impact of a program on a community), it is very far from neutral. Who has designed the yardstick, who is doing the measuring, and who is doing the evaluating have significant implications for the “outcomes”/“outputs” produced by social impact measurement and evaluation. Indeed, the significance given to such outcomes, the values placed on them, and any analysis brought forward from them are intrinsically culture-laden.

None of us has ever seen or fully experienced a truly equitable organization or society; so, how are we to hold to measures that likely have never captured the full picture of impact or even depicted what that full picture could be? When you add to that the racial makeup of the research community historically, a lack of equity expertise among research practitioners, and the annual demand for outputs from funders, you ensure a recipe for measurement and evaluation that, at best, cannot effectively tell the stories of Black communities, and, at worst, promulgates inaccurate and harmful ones.





Historically, assessments used by nonprofits and philanthropy have not valued the perspective of communities—especially that of Black communities, Indigenous communities, and others.

One of the first mega-donors to call for accountability in evaluation for social impact work was steel mogul Andrew Carnegie. He would lament that his fellow millionaires were squandering their money on unworthy charitable causes.<sup>1</sup> “It is ever to be remembered that one of the chief obstacles which the philanthropist meets in his efforts to do real and permanent good in this world is the practice of indiscriminate giving.”<sup>2</sup> His desire was likely steeped in the aspiration for what he deemed better outcomes and efficient and effective decisions about the allocation of resources, but it likely led to some of the current challenges.

Historically, assessments used by nonprofits and philanthropy have not valued the perspective of communities—especially that of Black communities, Indigenous communities, and others—but instead focused on measuring outputs that *organizations* defined as success. We have centered values often present in white-centric spaces, and highlight what donors request to see. This is slowly shifting, and a focus on developing pro-Black measurement and evaluation processes and tools is burgeoning. We see a beautiful opportunity here to study these tensions in the composition, administration, and analysis of measurement and evaluation, and design pro-Black approaches to the practice whereby impact equals what Black people need to thrive.<sup>3</sup>

Our understanding of impact and of what equity and justice can look like continues to evolve; consequently, what to look for and how to measure it does, too. This means that previous measures will be insufficient, again and again, as our learning of what’s possible in an equitable world deepens.

As a community of practitioners working to advance racial justice, the three of us have often found ourselves discussing

the understanding, importance, and practice of measurement and its impact on our work. We present this article as a reflection of our learning, our hopes, and the opportunities we see when partnering with measurement professionals to center equity, diversity, inclusion, and antiracism (EDIAR) in the work.

## WHAT EQUITABLE EVALUATION LOOKS LIKE

According to the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI), “Evaluative work should be designed and implemented commensurate with the values underlying equity work: Multi-culturally valid, and oriented toward participant ownership.”<sup>4</sup> *Multiculturally valid* focuses attention on how well evaluation captures meaning across dimensions of cultural diversity,<sup>5</sup> and *participant ownership* refers to evaluation oriented toward the needs of the program’s or system’s stakeholders.<sup>6</sup> This looks like engaging stakeholders from the community as *producers*—not just *recipients*—of outcomes. In a 2020 report on education philanthropy, Alex Cortez writes:

As the author and Mexican political leader Laura Esquivel wrote, “*whoever controls information, whoever controls meaning, acquires power.*” Measurement is an act of power. We measure what we value, and so what we measure reflects our values. If we are imposing measures of success on communities, we are essentially also then imposing our values and agenda on them.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than only engaging community members when the time comes to review results, engagement should occur further upstream, where critical decisions are made about the initiative or program being evaluated (such as how impact should be defined, what success for the program looks like, and so on). It should then continue through the data collection and analysis phases, and, finally, factor into the recommendations and implementation development process arising from the evaluation. To do this effectively, evaluative efforts must be flexible and require a reasonable allocation of resources, opportunities, obligations, and bargaining power for all stakeholders. Once engaged, community knowledge can be leveraged to understand the local context, interpret results, and allow for resulting strategies to be adapted

By incorporating a multilevel approach that involves all of us contributing from our respective places of influence, we can work toward building a pro-Black measurement and evaluation system.

to the local environment and culture, thus increasing the likelihood of sustainability.

Essentially, evaluators must recognize and respect the unique insights and assets that community members bring to an initiative, especially in instances when those evaluators are not proximate to the communities involved.

For example, in the wake of the mass school closures in spring 2020 as a result of COVID-19, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded YouthTruth—an organization that gathers and leverages student perceptions to help educators and education funders accelerate improvement—to administer student perception surveys nationwide so as to capture how these unprecedented events were impacting students. When the fall 2020 survey results came in, YouthTruth found that a greater number of students who identify as female (57 percent) or “identify another way” (79 percent)—in comparison to students who identify as male (33 percent)—indicated that feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious was creating an obstacle to learning.<sup>8</sup> YouthTruth engaged the students as active participants in the survey data analysis process, and together they developed hypotheses and conclusions based on the survey data.

Initial interpretations of the data had led some in the organization to consider focusing mental-health supports on female- and nonbinary-identifying students; but when students were brought into the analysis process, they provided feedback about the potential impact of societal gender norms on survey responses. One student posited that students who identify as male may not feel as comfortable divulging feelings of depression and anxiety, because that is often viewed as a sign of weakness, especially within communities of color. This shifted how this and other data points were interpreted, which in turn impacted the conclusions that were drawn and the decisions that were made based on those conclusions.<sup>9</sup>

Centering equity in evaluation requires a shift from the status quo and an emphasis on innovation to expand helpful tools that exist and develop new measurement frameworks. In many places, evaluators are partnering with equity leaders, building on traditional evaluation tools and methods, and

incorporating an equity frame where possible. In other instances, new frameworks are being developed to fully reinvent how evaluation is conducted, placing equity at the core. For example, Community Responsive Education (CRE), a national nonprofit that provides consulting services to schools and districts to make their pedagogy and curricula more reflective of the youth and families they serve, has been developing a youth wellness index. This index is based on a student survey that focuses on what CRE calls “leading” indicators of students’ well-being, including students’ sense of self-love, empathy, connectedness, and agency.<sup>10</sup>

CRE’s work is grounded in the idea that education’s focus on lagging indicators (signs that only become apparent after what has driven them has passed), such as grades and test scores, diminishes the incentive to address students’ overall well-being as a precondition for success in school. This example is a reminder of our ability to discover new standards by which to define success/impact, and to recognize the continuous evolution possible in measurement and evaluation when we hold a stance of curiosity and focus on learning.

We know that even with the redesign and creation of measurement and evaluation tools focused on racial equity, these are not as widely used as they should be, and we must continue to share our learning on what’s possible and how to be more effective. Our focus should always be on developing more effective tools that center community success and focus on equitable evaluation as both a process and an outcome.

The events of the past two years have more than laid bare the fact that we know too much now to keep operating in the same ways, and awakened calls for pro-Black systems change in how we define and measure success and impact.

The events of the past two years have more than laid bare the fact that we know too much now to keep operating in the same ways, and awakened calls for pro-Black systems change in how we define and measure success and impact. To be relevant and authentic in capturing the dynamism of and empowering real sustainable change in our communities, those who practice measurement and evaluation must shift the power from funders—and the set of researchers they have historically funded to undertake traditional methodologies—to those who are most closely experiencing the problems we are trying to solve. To effect that power shift, we recommend the following approaches at the individual, organizational, and system levels. We believe each of these levels has unique opportunities for action, and that they are interconnected. By incorporating a multilevel approach that involves all of us contributing from our respective places of influence, we can work toward building a pro-Black measurement and evaluation system.

### At the individual level

- Rethink definitions of success for all program participants in meaningful partnership with those participants.
- Go beyond test scores and other traditional, numeric, summative assessments. They are necessary but not sufficient.
- Recognize that many communities of color do not measure successful processes and experiences in linear, Western ways. For example, many Indigenous North American, African, and Australian peoples comprehend time to be circular, tied to seasons and experiences, and value collective achievement over individual. This stands in contrast to Western

conceptions, which center forward movement and “efficiency” as paramount, and value assessments of individual achievement (for example, standardized test scores) over collective ones (such as group projects).

### At the organizational level

- Center Black staff at all levels in designing evaluation measures and the implementation actions that come out of evaluation data.
- Listen to the voices of the folks on the ground living and/or doing the work in communities.
- Design programs and practices in partnership with, and based on, the feedback from these voices. For example, when they received thousands of reports of young people in dire need and experiencing challenges with the child welfare system during COVID, the organization Think of Us centered the lived experiences of over 27,000 current and former foster youth to design a microcash grant program—not as a traditional “academic research exercise, but as an attempt to understand the needs of current and former foster youth from their own perspectives, elevating their own voices.”<sup>11</sup> The organization analyzed the feedback and used the data to design and launch subsequent programs and areas of policy advocacy that were responsive to areas of greatest need but outside their previous core competencies.
- Bring an equity lens to set the threshold for and appropriate emphasis on scaling. Organizations designed by and for Black communities can make the case for growing at a different pace or one based on a more expansive set of success criteria than traditional social service organizations.

### At the systems level

- Ask active questions about how to offset the structural harm that has been done to communities in the name of evaluation.



- Design policies that respond to those questions.
- Create ecosystems of evaluators in deep partnership with equity leaders/subject matter experts to update and design new evaluation tools.
- Support the entry of historically under-represented identities into the measurement field (people of color, people with physical disabilities, and so on).

We acknowledge that none of our organizations is living these completely, and we challenge you—and ourselves—to take action from our respective roles. We leave you with the following specific recommendations for evaluators, funders, consultants, and intermediaries based on our work in this space:

#### **As an evaluator**

- Partner with other researchers and consultants who are proximate to the communities you are evaluating.
- Get in community with EDIAR subject matter experts. Do the work necessary to be in a trusted relationship. Don't just bring them on to check a box. Center their questions, insights, and recommendations as you design your methodologies.
- Use your proximity to Black communities to serve as a translator to your funders, who may be at earlier stages of their equity journey. Help them to understand when the data—both numerical and on-the-ground perception—suggest they are not walking their talk, and show them how to shift.

#### **As a funder**

- If you haven't yet, commission an equity audit and evaluation of your work. Hire a pro-Black evaluation/audit team.
- Move away from annual program evaluation that focuses solely on numerical measures or

outcomes, and consider a broader, more robust picture of impact.

- Operate with a stance of learning and an orientation to the evolving nature of evaluation.
- Hold yourself open to centering the ways in which your grantees are structuring their work and their worlds and letting that shift your work and how it is measured—not the other way around. For example, consider that pro-Black institutions may operate with a more systemic approach/lens, which may mean evolving definitions of success, greater responsiveness, and increased flexibility in assessment.

#### **As a consultant**

- Help organizations interpret evaluation data and think through their implications with a pro-Black lens.
- With these implications in mind, center the experiences of Black program participants and staff in designing equitable implementation.
- Encourage your clients to engage measurement and evaluation experts with an explicit focus on racial equity in their design and evaluation processes.

#### **As an intermediary**

- Use your proximity to Black communities and your trusted relationships with funders and partners who may be at earlier stages of their equity journey to serve as a translator between grassroots and grassroots.
- Help those in positions of power to understand the work and the reparation needed to build a collaborative culture and mutually construct definitions of success that result in all community members thriving.

*The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of their respective organizations.*

## NOTES

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10. This information is based on a talk attended by Titilola Harley, given by one of Community Responsive Education's codirectors, Jeff Duncan-Andrade, as part of the Equal Opportunity Schools' (a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grantee) 2020 symposium.
11. *Think of Us, COVID-19 MicroCash Grant Application Data Briefing* (Washington, DC: Think of Us, March 10, 2021).

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# Pro-Blackness Is Aspirational

## A Conversation with Cyndi Suarez and Shanelle Matthews

■  
“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. . . . People do ultimately need to reckon with themselves and do the work.”

*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?







*“People want to be a part of the change, but they also have these allegiances to the systems that allow for racism to exist.”*

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.



*“Organizations are made up of people—and in order to build a more inclusive world, those people have to identify the shared problem around 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.”*

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



*“You cannot truly be 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.”*

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

*"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."*

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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# The Liberatory World We Want to Create

## Loving Accountability and the Limitations of Cancel Culture

*by Aja Couchois Duncan and Kad Smith*

Our histories are filled with music, dance, ceremony. And, too, our histories are filled with violence, starvation, captivity. But we are not our trauma. We experience trauma, yet we are infinitely more powerful than the harm done to us. And the just and liberatory world we want to create will not be birthed from our unhealed wounds.




*There is no end to this love  
It has formed your bodies  
Feeds your bright spirits  
And no matter what happens in these times of breaking—  
No matter dictators, the heartless, and liars  
No matter—you are born of those  
Who kept ceremonial embers burning in their hands  
All through the miles of relentless exile  
Those who sang the path through massacre  
All the way to sunrise  
You will make it through—*

—Joy Harjo, from “For Earth’s Grandsons,”  
*An American Sunrise*



The world we are seeking to create together requires that we move beyond anger to harness the transformative power of love.

## LOVE, A FORGOTTEN TONGUE



In *Measuring Love in the Journey for Justice*, Shiree Teng and Sammy Nuñez “call upon love as an antidote to injustice.”<sup>1</sup> But too often in our equity-based systems-change work, love is a forgotten tongue. Even in contexts where Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) are leading organizations, networks, and change efforts, our engagement can be marked by competition, judgment, adversarialism, and distrust.

Coming, as we are, from centuries of land theft, enslavement, genocide, and systemic inequities that threaten our daily ability to survive, let alone thrive, it is understandable that we are angry—righteously so. And yet, the world we are seeking to create together requires that we move beyond anger to harness the transformative power of love.

In Ojibwe, one word for love is *zhawenim*: to show loving-kindness. It is a transitive animate verb, which means it is an action done by one to/with another. It is relational. Love is not something that is hidden somewhere, waiting to be found. It is something we create together—something that must be cultivated and practiced.

## MEDICINE TO HARVEST

One of the many ways systemic injustice works is through the story it teaches us to tell ourselves: A story that locates responsibility within individuals for the effects of settler colonialism, enslavement, extractive capitalism, and U.S. global domination. This is how we, as BIPOC people, can become defined by the trauma that we, our families, and our ancestors have experienced.

As James Baldwin reminds us, “History is not the past, it is present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.”<sup>2</sup>

So the question becomes: What do we carry and how do we carry it? Our histories are filled with music, dance, ceremony. And, too, our histories are filled with violence, starvation, captivity. But we are not our trauma. We *experience* trauma, yet we are infinitely more powerful than the harm done to us. And the just and liberatory world we want to create will not be birthed from our unhealed wounds.

In *My Grandmother’s Hands*, Resmaa Menakem describes how white-body supremacy “doesn’t live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies.”<sup>3</sup> This is why any effort to advance racial equity-based systems change that addresses other intersectional forms of oppression must be an act of community care, one that centers our collective well-being—the well-being of our bodies, our hearts, our spirits. What is needed is to acknowledge trauma, honoring its impact while striving to relinquish its stronghold. It is through this effort that we claim our strength, our purpose, our aggregate power to transform the world.

There are many different somatic and energetic practices that can support us in healing trauma—both on our own and together. So, we have a great deal of medicine to harvest. What is necessary is that we all tend to this important work for the sake of ourselves, our communities, our vision of a just and liberated world. It is also critical that our social change work centers healing and inner work as a fundamental aspect of all our efforts collectively. (For an in-depth discussion of why this matters and what can be made possible as a result, please read “Toward Love, Healing, Resilience & Alignment: The Inner Work of Social Transformation & Justice” by Sheryl Petty, Kristen Zimmerman, and Mark Leach.<sup>4</sup>)

Without careful attention to how we want to be together, what we do together will be nothing more than the replication of centuries upon centuries of harm.

## CANCEL CULTURE

*Cancel culture* is a phrase that is relatively new to our shared lexicon.<sup>5</sup> It is a term that describes a phenomenon many of us can loosely identify in shape and form, but struggle to explicitly name what it is and isn’t. “Canceling” someone was most prominently brought to our collective



A culture that positions us and requires of us the ability to cancel one another is a direct descendant of centuries of colonization. Imperialism and colonization have thrived on “us vs. them” categorizations for several hundreds of years.

consciousness through online engagement in the twenty-first-century public squares of Twitter, tumblr, and Facebook. It served as a way to bring attention to behavior that could broadly be deemed reprehensible, abhorrent, or just generally disagreeable. Often, it has been used in jest. Over the past five years, however, the act of canceling someone has risen to such cultural significance that our last three sitting presidents have remarked on the role in which it is influencing how we engage with one another. For better, or for worse?

In July 2020, movement theorist and visionary adrienne maree brown wrote a blog post titled “unthinkable thoughts: call out culture in the age of covid-19,” in which she interrogates the practice of publicly calling people out.<sup>6</sup> For some, there was immediate resonance in brown’s words; for others, feelings of frustration, as they felt her blog didn’t adequately highlight the seismic disadvantages survivors of harm, abuse, and oppression are often confronted with as barriers to their healing. This blog post later evolved into the book *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*, which brown wrote in order to add the much-needed nuance and context that critics of the original post had suggested were missing.<sup>7</sup> In the book, she writes, “I have felt a punitive tendency root and flourish within our movements.”<sup>8</sup> And she worries about what she perceives to be an inability to draw distinctions, as well as a lack of knowledge regarding “how to handle conflict or how to move towards accountability in satisfying and collective ways.”<sup>9</sup> It is a must-read for anyone attempting to make meaning of the promise of practices around embracing public accountability while also honoring the need for a humane disposition when seeking atonement, justice, and reconciliation.

In our nonprofit sector, we are often confronted with making sense of the widespread translatability of cultural moments and forces. We don’t have to look far to see how cancel culture informs the way in which we experience everyday interactions on the Internet and in real life. The emergence of cancel culture has given way to the mainstream media’s

ability to capitalize on its age-old motto, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Our relationship to being entertained has transformed, with the very notion of what fandom requires of us having evolved over the last few years: “Fans” and supporters of the curators of culture are now confronted with constantly revisiting who deserves the gift (and, as many might say, curse) of celebrity, and who doesn’t. More directly, it’s flavoring the way we work through conflicts, tensions, and transitions within our organizations.

A part of what makes exploring cancel culture so fascinating is understanding how it’s a byproduct of our larger culture, and how it has become a subculture in and of itself. A culture can most simply be broken down into the beliefs, values, norms, customs, and knowledge shared by a group of people. So, what happens when our values are shaped by a desire to cancel one another? What happens when our beliefs are directly or indirectly influenced by who we understand to be cancelable and who not? It leads us to a place that is not new at all but rather all too familiar.

A culture that positions us and requires of us the ability to cancel one another is a direct descendant of centuries of colonization. Imperialism and colonization have thrived on “us vs. them” categorizations for several hundreds of years.<sup>10</sup> To be canceled or not to be doesn’t leave us with much room for understanding the nuance and complexity of human morality and interactions. It is a cultural force that assigns us clear roles: prosecutor and defender. The prosecutors hope to find affinity in justifying the need for cancellation, and defenders find refuge in staunchly denying that any wrongdoing or harm has occurred. Pick a side: the issue is black or white; you’re either right or wrong, good or bad. And there is often no charted path forward suggesting that perhaps multiple truths can be present at once.

It is a phenomenon that can swiftly be weaponized by those with power and influence; and, conversely, it may leave many of us wanting more when it is positioned as a liberatory tactic. Why? Because it all too often fails to leave us with

The unintended consequence of cancel culture being such a directive phenomenon is how it largely pushes us to anchor ourselves in uninspiring notions of what accountability and responsibility should and could look like.

direction or some guided sense of what to do about the more systemic challenge at the root of the behavior, beliefs, or actions we wish to disrupt. What is the lesson to be learned for those who are canceled? The term “canceling”—through linguistic origin alone—may invoke feelings of abandonment, disposability, and an abrupt “ending” of sorts that doesn’t provide a path toward redemption and atonement. For those seeking healing or accountability, has cancel culture permanently transformed the motivations that enter our hearts and minds, or is it primarily reactive in nature? If it is reactive, where do we turn for the visionary motivation we so desperately need when we are constantly overwhelmed by all there is to react to?

Cancel culture has not received mainstream legitimacy because it is innately transformational; it has become commonplace because it pairs neatly with a vast tool kit of oppressive strategies but can be practiced while masquerading as a liberatory tactic.

The unintended consequence of cancel culture being such a directive phenomenon is how it largely pushes us to anchor ourselves in uninspiring notions of what accountability and responsibility should and could look like. If we truly hope to commit ourselves to tearing down the dominant culture that prevents us from arriving at a liberated world, we would be well served to unpack how the legitimization of a cancel culture requires us to pull from ways of interacting encoded through centuries of designed divisiveness and a retributive thirst for blood sport.

### **BUILDING A BRIDGE TOGETHER— ONE ANCESTOR, ONE BONE, ONE LIGAMENT AT A TIME**

After so many centuries of oppression, it is easy to see how seductive the power of canceling another might be. But reparation does not repair if all we are doing is disposing of one another.

In their recently published article “Into the Fire: Lessons from Movement Conflicts,” Ingrid Benedict, Weyam Ghadbian, and

Jovida Ross outline the ways in which we “enact subtle and gross forms of anti-Blackness, white supremacy, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, and other structural oppression [to which we would add *settler colonialism* and *Native erasure*]. This overlays with our unprocessed trauma and habitual coping strategies, and they ricochet off of each other to create interpersonal tangles that can blow up organizing teams and organizations.”<sup>11</sup>

These toxic ways of being with one another reflect and reinforce the larger toxicity in our society. But we cannot create a better world by reproducing the poisons of the current one. We must recognize, disrupt, heal their effects, and transform them in order for us to bridge from our current state to a just, loving, and liberated world. In order to do so, we need to draw on inner work and healing practices to both replenish ourselves and cultivate our individual and collective resilience. For example:

- *Tapping into an awareness of our divine connection.* Individualism has wreaked havoc on ourselves and our relationship to the divine, to source, to the wellspring of spiritual connection. Whether we find resonance with the teaching from physics that we are not separate or even solid, or from spiritual traditions that help us to develop a relationship with god, having an awareness of our divine connection is core to replenishment and resourcefulness.
- *Honoring the sacred.* Honoring the sacred looks very different depending on our cultural backgrounds and learned practices. Essentially, we are recognizing and celebrating the profound gift of everything and everyone, expressing gratitude, and honoring our interdependence.
- *Cultivating compassion for all beings.* We all suffer, and we all make mistakes. While power and privilege have huge implications for the consequences of mistakes, we can still witness human error—our own and that of others—from

The healing and inner work lays the foundation for us to be and act from our fully resourced selves—to be rooted in what bell hooks defines as a *love ethic*.

a place of compassion. Compassion doesn't mean a lack of accountability or that there aren't consequences when we cause one another harm. Compassion means recognizing that we are all doing the best we can in the moment, even if our best is sometimes awful.

- *Centering presence and awareness.* The only change that is possible is change that happens in the present. And in order to be agents of positive change, we must be present and aware. We must be breathing. We must have both feet touching the earth. We must be able to hear the murmurings of the wind.
- *Re-yoking our bodies and spirits.* We are spirits having a human experience. Both our bodies and our spirits must be in cooperative connection in order to participate in the change we came here to create. This means knowing we are more than our mortality; we are working generations backward and forward.
- *Oxygenating, moving, and nourishing our human forms.* Without attending to the nourishment, breath, and health of our bodies, nothing but distress, dis-ease, dissimulation are possible. Liberation requires our vitality, whatever that looks like in our different human forms.

It is only when we have strengthened ourselves and our collectives that we can really engage in the essential work of transforming our world. As Tarana Burke reminds us, “Our humanity, our individual and collective vulnerability, needs and deserves some breathing room.”<sup>12</sup>

## LOVING ACCOUNTABILITY—AN ANTIDOTE

The healing and inner work lays the foundation for us to be and act from our fully resourced selves—to be rooted in what bell hooks defines as a *love ethic*. “Domination cannot exist,” hooks writes, “in any social situation where a love ethic prevails.”<sup>13</sup>

Coming from love, being rooted in a love ethic, does not mean we, as BIPOC social justice leaders and activists, are accepting systemic oppression. Rather, it means we are not continuing to “reshape the same tools that we use to dismantle the ever changing systems.”<sup>14</sup> We cannot rely on strategies of resistance to chart a path to liberation. Coming, as so many of us do, from movement work, there is a tendency to show up in a fighting stance, to focus only on what is wrong, to distrust everything and everyone. But liberation does not come from adversarialism; it comes from connection and loving accountability.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, Robin Wall Kimmerer explores the wisdom of lichens. She writes, “Some of earth’s oldest beings, lichens are born from reciprocity. . . . These ancients carry teachings in the ways that they live. They remind us of the enduring power that arises from mutualism, from the sharing of the gifts carried by each species. Balanced reciprocity has enabled them to flourish under the most stressful of conditions.”<sup>15</sup> Our conditions are indeed stressful; attention to our connections, to our mutualism and interdependence, is essential not only for our survival but also for our ability as BIPOC people to thrive.

The sacred nature of our connection does not preclude conflict, disagreements, misunderstandings, hurt feelings. We affect one another. It is important that we understand the impacts we are having: what we are doing and how we are being and what effect it is having on our collective change efforts. At the most basic level, it is about giving and receiving feedback, about holding one another to our best possible selves. We deserve that. It is why we are trying to change the world. *We know a better one is possible.*

Our mutuality flourishes when our love ethic is strong. And our love ethic is nourished by the practice of loving accountability. Loving accountability means we are learning together, and that we are risking vulnerability in service of creating authentic connection and a better future. If we refuse to take risks, and if we attack others to protect ourselves, we are

avoiding being held accountable to the collective. And without collective accountability, we cannot work together to create a meaningful, equitable, just society.

The practice of loving accountability consists of honest and authentic communication, vulnerability, and the willingness to hold each other accountable for our impacts—beyond just words. If a collective value or guiding principle is repeatedly violated by someone, and no amount of communication and support can interrupt it, then loving accountability instructs us in employing meaningful consequences—not as punishment but rather as ensuring the health of the collective through meaningful boundaries. Not rigid structures, but something firm and porous as skin. Without attention to healthy boundaries, our espousal of values and group agreements are just words—and what holds us together ceases to exist.

Mia Birdsong describes accountability as being “about ourselves in the context of the collective”:

It's seeing the ways we cause hurt or harm as actions that indicate we are not living in alignment with values that recognize our own humanity or the humanity of others. It's about recognizing when our behavior is out of alignment with our best selves. . . . Accountability is also about recognizing and accepting that we are necessary and wanted. It's understanding that when we neglect ourselves, don't care for ourselves, or are not working to live as our best selves, we are devaluing the time, energy, and care that our loved ones offer us.<sup>16</sup>

Loving accountability supports our ability to make meaningful and transformative change *together*. This means tending to our genuine connection, coming from a place of deep curiosity, and being and acting from a wellspring of love.



*Our breathing is sacred because energy that connects us  
is older than the structures we are unlearning and  
will persist beyond the imagination of this species.  
The energy moving through us, as air and so much more, is eternal.  
I call it love. Thank you for the love moving through you.  
With every breath.*

—adrienne maree brown,  
*Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation*



## NOTES

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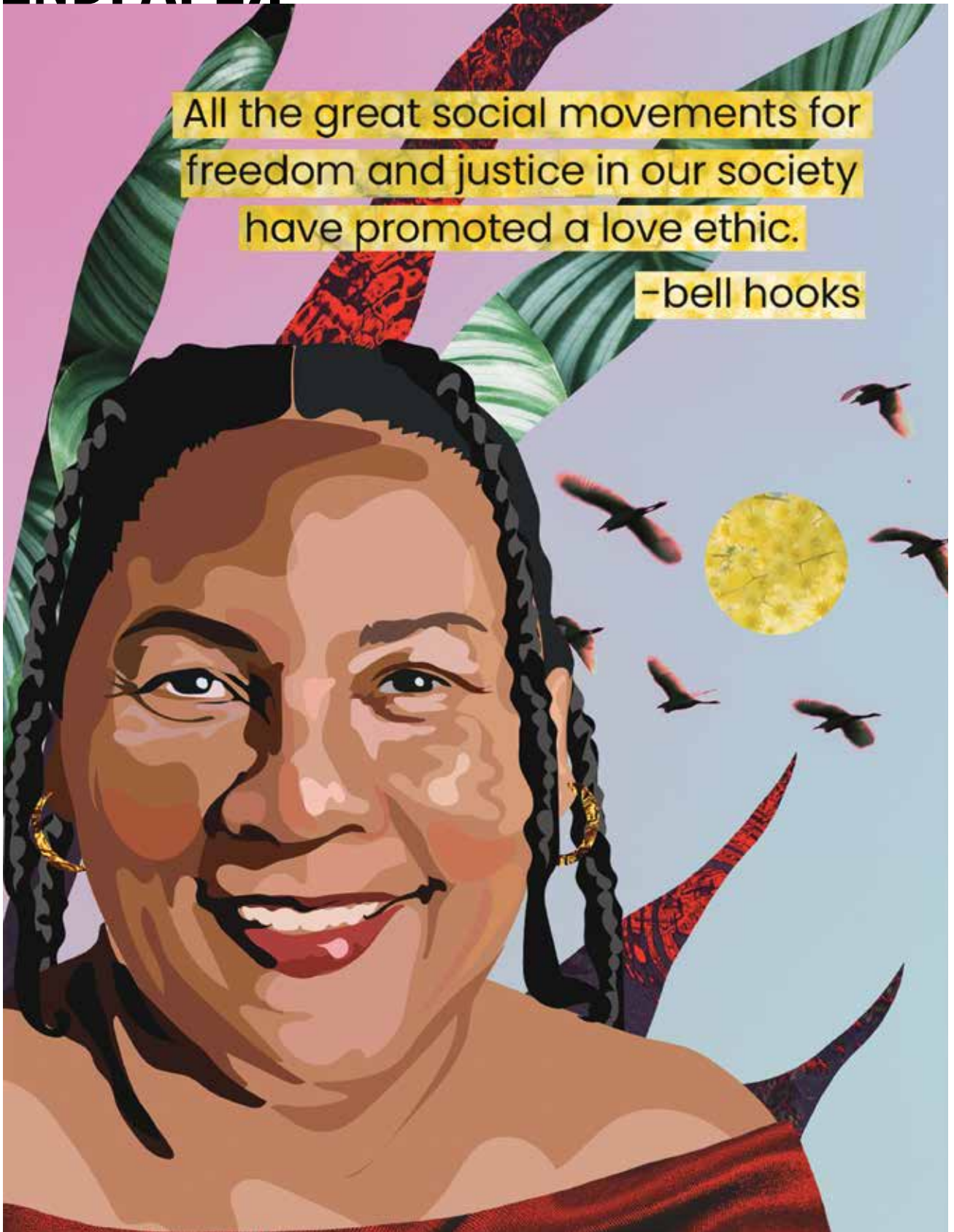
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# ENDPAPER

All the great social movements for  
freedom and justice in our society  
have promoted a love ethic.

-bell hooks





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