RACIAL JUSTICE

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.[1] 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.

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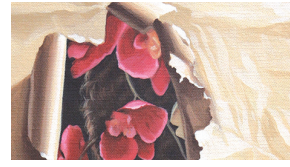
Dax-Devlon Ross: I appreciate that. So, I was very inspired by the fact that you used the term *pro-Black* in your call-out to writers for this edition. It made me really think about what is being asked here. It made me think of Black Power and discomfort—how when the phrase *Black Power* was created, 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.

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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."[2] 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.[3] 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.[4] 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 *Nigrescense 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.[5] 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*

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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] Wengrow's new book *The Dawn of Everything*.[6] 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.[7] 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.[8] 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*[9]—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.[10] And it was often aligned with what the needs of the community were in a given moment in time. Wengrow is an
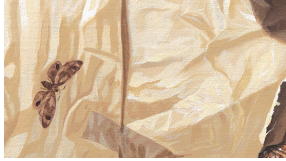
> *"This notion of fixedness—that we are this way all the time, at all times— is not the thing we're going to root ourselves in, because in order for us to have the greatest impact, or for us to survive . . . we need to shift."*

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.[11]) 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
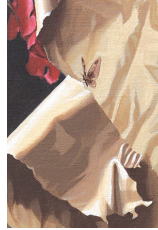
that in mind. *I* came to this sector because I wanted to do good in the world. Where else would I go?

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

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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

DETAIL OF "NEW ERA" BY CARLOS GÁMEZ DE FRANCISCO

> "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. . . . 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

1.   Dax-Devlon Ross, "A Letter to My White Male Friends of a Certain Age," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, June 5, 2020, nonprofitquarterly.org/a-letter-to-my-white-male-friends-of-a-certain-age/; Dax-Devlon Ross, *Letters to My White Male Friends* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021); and Dax-Devlon Ross, "Generational Differences in Racial Equity Work," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, April 29, 2021, nonprofitquarterly.org/generational-differences-in-racial-equity-work/.

2.   Cyndi Suarez, "A Cult of Democracy—Toward a Pluralistic Politics," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, January 7, 2021, nonprofitquarterly.org/a-cult-of-democracy-toward-a-pluralistic-politics.

3.   Cyndi Suarez, "Examining Whiteness," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, January 27, 2022, nonprofitquarterly.org/examining-whiteness/.

4.   Janet E. Helms, *A Race Is a Nice Thing to Have: A Guide to Being a White Person or Understanding the White Persons in Your Life*, 3rd ed. (San Diego, CA: Cognella, 2019).

5.   Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33, No. 6 (October-December 1986): S14–S32. And see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (Perspectives on Gender)*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999).

6.   David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

7.   Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

8.   Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

9.   Grant Maxwell, "'Symmetry across Scale': The Fractal Quality of Process," chap. 7 in *The Dynamics of Transformation: Tracing an Emerging World View* (Nashville, TN: Persistent Press, 2017), 84–92.

10. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*.

11. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011).

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