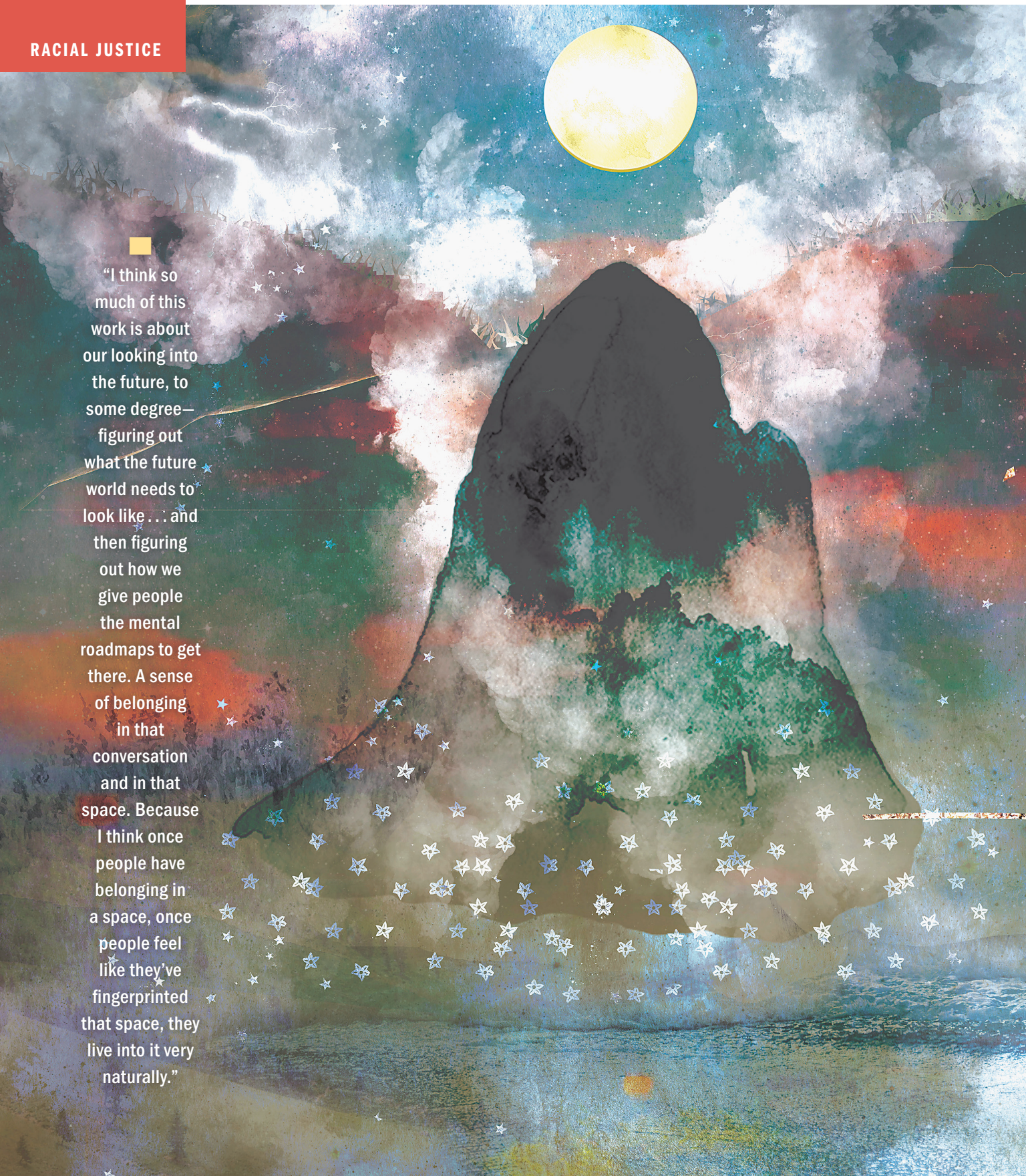


**RACIAL JUSTICE**

■ “I think so much of this work is about our looking into the future, to some degree—figuring out what the future world needs to look like . . . and then figuring out how we give people the mental roadmaps to get there. A sense of belonging in that conversation and in that space. Because I think once people have belonging in a space, once people feel like they’ve fingerprinted that space, they live into it very naturally.”





# THE SPACE BEYOND

## A Conversation with Cyndi Suarez, Darren Isom, and F. Javier Torres-Campos

*In this conversation, Cyndi Suarez, NPQ's president and editor in chief; Darren Isom, a partner in The Bridgespan Group's San Francisco office and host of the podcast Dreaming In Color; and antiracist philanthropic leader F. Javier Torres-Campos discuss how to bridge to and cultivate the world we want.*



**Cyndi Suarez:** I'm so glad to have the two of you together. Javier, Darren brought you up at a roundtable we had back in December. He described something you talk about, three types of organizations. And I'd love to go into that.

**Darren Isom:** I can tee it up if that's helpful.

**F. Javier Torres-Campos:** Yeah, 100 percent.

**DI:** Javier's my partner in crime, and I throw him into the mix all the time. So, I was lucky enough last summer to convene a group of Black and Brown folks in philanthropy. And this was just a way to honor the folks that are doing the work, and to give ourselves the space and time to think about the work and the luxury of being able to reflect on what success looks like. We convened this group of about 25 really brilliant folks in Martha's Vineyard. It reminded me of a few things. I was at a Donors of Color Network event in New Mexico about a year ago, and my dear friend Urvashi Vaid—who helped start the Donors of Color Network and was a mentor to me and to so many of us in the space—couldn't attend but gave the closing session thoughts via Zoom. She looked out at this group that had been there for two days discussing the fate of the world and mapping our path forward—and we're looking battered as hell, because the world's an absolute mess right now—and she said, "I know the world feels overwhelming right now, and I know it's easy to feel dispirited, but I just want you all to know that we are winning. This is what winning looks like. Winning looks like chaos when you're uprooting broken systems and creating new ones. And I want you to look around the room, and this is what a winning team looks like."

I've been holding on to that; because I think that in many ways, this is the work that we've been called to do. And so the Martha's Vineyard event was building on that—bringing the good people together to talk about what success looks like. And at some point, Javier stands up and does what Javier does. He offers this really profound thought that kind of shapes the conversation, steers it in a different direction. He talked about these three different types of organizations that have shaped the nonprofit—and, more importantly, the philanthropic—world. The first type are the frontline organizations. They are fighting—triage organizations in the trenches handling things as they come and really doing the good work firsthand. The second type are organizations that are living in the future—organizations that

## “What roadmaps, what *Green Books* are we giving for future generations to build upon? Because a lot of these things that we’re building now won’t come to fruition for some time.”

are creating the world that we hope to live in. They’re future-leaning and future-looking organizations. And the third type—and here Javier paused, because this was a group of Black and Brown folks, and from a code-switching perspective, he’s signaling, Let’s talk about this type, right? He’s trying to be diplomatic, to figure out what’s the best way to say it. “The third type,” he said, “are organizations that probably shouldn’t exist in the future; but they’re here now. And we have to figure out, as these organizations die, what grows from them.” He called them the “compost pile.” And I remember writing that down and underlining it. And what was clear within that space, interestingly enough, is that the conversation went very naturally to the second group. We were the future, the future-leaning folks. We weren’t there to talk about the compost pile.

And that is a conversation that needs to be had. We need to figure out what we’re going to do with these organizations and what’s going to grow from them. But that’s not where our time should be spent—because that’s where everybody’s time is spent, that’s where everyone’s money is spent, that’s where everyone’s emotional and intellectual capital is spent: trying to figure out what we do with those organizations.

What if we used our time and our thinking to explore that second type and think about what we’re trying to create, who’s in that world, and how we stabilize it in a way that’s smart and thoughtful? That’s what I took away from the conversation. And for me it became a great way to talk about, How do we dream together? How do we think about what we’re trying to create and what we’re putting in place for future generations to take on? It was powerful for me to have that space; but also, it was powerful for me because what a flex, right? What a power flex. I joke that early in my career, I would get invited to these tables, and so much of my time was spent thinking about what’s wrong, what’s broken, what needs to be fixed. And at some point, your flex becomes what’s *right*—what we’re building upon, what we’re going to create. And I think that was such a power shift for me, having that group of folks in the room who were able to think about, What is the world that we’re creating? How are we building on our assets to build something new? *We’re the storytellers for that new world.*

One of my favorite pieces by Duke Ellington is called “Three Black Kings.” Beautiful piece, absolutely gorgeous. It’s a piece that I knew growing up, but I didn’t learn until a few years ago that Duke Ellington had dictated it from his deathbed to his son. Duke Ellington never heard the piece performed. And it just makes me wonder, what are we dictating for others to take away and to build upon? I do think we have to start thinking about what we’re laying down from a foundational perspective. What roadmaps, what *Green Books* are we giving for future generations to build upon? Because a lot of these things that we’re building now won’t come to fruition for some time. And so it’s on us to really think about that second type/bucket and what we are dreaming, what we are looking to create, and how we lay the foundation for that and also create the way for there to be stewards of that space.

**FJTC:** Darren, that was a really stellar summary and synthesis. You said it much better than I could have. And I have a couple of contextual and background pieces that I’ll share. My practice is very reflective of my understanding of the importance of aligning my behavior with my values, and that is a constant question in my life. I believe that we’re all complicit in the tensions in which we engage, especially in philanthropy, and that interrogation creates an opportunity for me to look back and say, “Okay, those are things I don’t want to do anymore. I didn’t know better then, or I was at a different place in my life.” So, one of the things I acknowledge is that at different stages of my career, I have judged the choices of other people’s lines of work—being like, Yo, there’s nothing that’s gonna happen there. Like, What are you doing? And it wasn’t until two frameworks were shared with me that I changed my perspective.

One is what Darren was describing, which is a framework that climate justice activists use and talk about. They use these three terms that Darren talked about: those of us who are holding a line, resisting, and making sure that those of

“Let’s stop assuming that any of us has an answer. Let’s understand that this is a mosaic—that we’re all playing a unique and necessary role.”

us who are here today and tomorrow are okay; those of us who are building the new and really dreaming into the future; and then those of us who are hospicing and composting the systems that need to transition—but that doesn’t mean that their material composition isn’t necessary for the future, because death is a natural part of life.

The other framework is Deborah Frieze’s Two-Loop Theory.<sup>1</sup> The two frameworks share very similar terminology. And they have helped me every time I’m in a conversation in which I start to see folks lean into the type of judgment that I used to experience of anybody’s work. I’m able to say, “Okay, let’s just stop. Let’s stop assuming that any of us has an answer. Let’s understand that this is a mosaic—that we’re all playing a unique and necessary role. And we can see ourselves in relationship to one another in this type of categorization and respect and value each of those lines.”

Now, to Darren’s point, my work for the last six years has been all about dreaming. And in that space, I developed a strategy at Surdna that first considered how to give R&D money to communities of color—the R&D money that White men get to build what’s in their imagination, that then the rest of us get stuck living in.<sup>2</sup> What we quickly realized is how truly expensive that work is in communities of color and low-income communities—because we have all of the trauma and unmet basic social infrastructure that need to be addressed first, and throughout the journey, in order for most of us to have the privilege to dream that things can be different.

So, those are the pieces that I’ve been grappling with around how we can cultivate the conditions for more of us to have the privilege and ability to dream and begin to build what’s in our brains. Because I am certain that what’s in the imaginations of communities of color and low-income communities is always going to center care, is always going to center love, is going to find a different way for us to be than the conditions in which we’re living.

**CS:** It is so interesting that you say this. I like the line of respecting all three types—because, I have to admit, I’m really biased toward innovation. Coming into this role at NPQ, I shifted the organization toward knowledge creation by people of color. This is my third year in this role. It is so much work for me to create the kind of organization whose results can be seen outside. And hiring? Hiring people who can host a space for visionary knowledge creation is no small feat. I literally have to call people and be like, “Why are you not applying?” And the people who are really qualified are like, “I have never done this before.” I’m like, “No one’s done this before.” It’s not like it’s not fun. It’s not like it’s a burden or anything. I feel really privileged to do this work and I can’t believe I get to do this.

And then there’s the content that we’ve gotten as a result of the content that we put out there. I was talking with a leadership practitioner the other day, and she said, “You know, there’s something that you guys have done where now, whenever I’m in a meeting and people are talking real smart, they’ll be like, ‘We need to have an article on this.’” There’s this thing that’s being created in a short period of time, and it’s almost like there was just a green light, and everybody was like, “Of course we do this.”

I’m writing a piece right now called “Leadership Is Voice,” which is based on [Michel] Foucault’s last series of talks on *parrhesia*, the *parrhesiastes*, the history of truth telling—and how in Western thought there has always been an obsession with trying to identify who was a truth-teller and how truth telling was done.<sup>3</sup> He talks about the historical shift and how that happened. And then he talks about what you have to do to become a truth-teller. It’s basically spiritual work, really knowing the self.

And as I’m writing this piece, I’m thinking, How do I start it? It made me think of the piece that Moe Mitchell did, “Building



“What I’ve been realizing and talking to people about is that our voices are also multiple—not just because they’re fractured through trauma but because we have connection to many realities at the same time. It’s not a linear reality.”

Resilient Organizations,” which we copublished with a couple of other media outlets.<sup>4</sup> He’s talking about the ideological challenges in the movement space and how they’re tearing institutions apart, and what needs to happen. How do we grapple with these different levels of experienced trauma, and with everyone trying to create something together and being in different places? That’s a bad summary, but when I went to New York to film the video that went along with the article, there was so much planning around it, because it was a really risky truth to tell—which is one of the core things of being a *parrhesiastes*. It’s all risky, right? If it’s not risky, you’re not truth telling, apparently. And so, I remember that he said to me, “I stand behind this.” And I remember just being so happy to hear those words, because I’ve actually had people pull articles because they’re afraid that somebody will disagree with them. It’s not uncommon. I’ve had a lot of people go, “I can’t, you have to pull this, I’m in a conversation, I could get fired.” There’s a lot of fear. And even if it’s not something that immediate, even just the fact that somebody on social media might cancel you. There’s just a lot of fear of speaking.

But the idea about the voice part that I got to as I’m wrapping up the article is that our voices, the voices of people of color, are often subordinated. And there’s a framework for how to come to voice when your voice is subordinated.

There’s a professor at Yale, James Scott, who writes about political life at the level of society. And one of the things he found after 30 years of research is that when someone is subordinated politically in a society, there are four levels before their truth can become part of the mainstream. (I have a piece on it called “Voice under Domination,” which looks at that framework.<sup>5</sup>) But he basically says that you need at least one person to understand what you’re saying. That’s the first step. Once you say something, someone else goes, “Yup, I had that same thing too, I thought that same thing.” You just need one person to validate your thinking. Then, once you have a few people who think the same—this is all off what’s considered “legitimate” discourse, this is people in the back room talking—you get to the second level. Now you have a few people who have a different narrative. And then what happens is there’s a point in the main discourse everyone’s waiting for, where that narrative can break through. And that’s considered to be the breakthrough point—and then it becomes part of the narrative.

So, there’s work to do—right?—when a voice is subordinated. It doesn’t just speak because you’ve invited it to speak. And then what I’ve been realizing and talking to people about is that our voices are also multiple—not just because they’re fractured through trauma but because we have connection to many realities at the same time. It’s not a linear reality. So, learning to speak like that, and for us to edit that kind of work, is the task before me. It’s what I’m always trying to figure out—how to do that. So, I feel like that’s where this framework resonated for me, with this idea of a voice, and how hard it is to actually get that thinking out there, even though it’s what the world needs; and how reorienting *NPQ* to do that isn’t easy. When I’ve described it to people, they’re like, “Yes!” And I get the money. But the hardest thing to do is actually hiring people and supporting them to do that work.

Even with this issue of the magazine, which was meant to demonstrate how we are winning in terms of all the work we are doing . . . everybody was saying, “Yes, yes, yes, we’re winning!” And then I get the articles, and they weren’t reflecting that. And I’m like, What’s going on?

**DI:** Interesting. You know what’s funny? I love this. I love the idea of voice for a number of different reasons. One, I think that folks of color are masterful storytellers. We’ve had to be able to use language, stories, conversations as a way of calibrating multiple worlds that were just not aligned. And I think there’s something to be said about the fact that whereas this work is hard, this is the work that we were all trained to do. And we’re really good at it, honestly.

There’s a wonderful quote by Ted Chiang about how the written word, in many ways, values facts in a way that’s problematic.<sup>6</sup> Because once you can write down things, you can hold yourself to those things and hold on to those facts in a way that is used to tell a story. Whereas Eastern cultures, African cultures, the Griots, the bards, they knew to change the

“I don't know that we're ever going to get away from the multiverse, from the everything everywhere all the time, and I think that strategies for the future need to account for that fact. *Because that's the world that's been designed for us.*”

“facts” to make sure the lesson got across—because the lesson was more important than the facts; so, you had to change the story to make sure that the community learned what they needed to learn, right? And that was the art of storytelling, right? How does the story change to make sure that you learn the right lesson? And so, there's something powerful about voice from a narrative-changing perspective.

I also think there's something powerful about voice as an asset that communities of color have, if offered the opportunity to practice it in a way that's meaningful and powerful. It reminds me—we did this piece on what everyone can learn from leaders of color. It was a piece that showed up in *SSIR*, and then there was an *HBR* version.<sup>7</sup> And what was so powerful about it was that we knew all the time that, ultimately, the whole lesson is that you have to be 20 times smarter. You know, everything that your parents tell you from a work perspective. What we don't recognize is that in navigating the world, you just learn a whole host of different skills and capabilities that your White counterparts do not have to learn. You just become extremely good at some things, because in order for me to have gotten off the stoop in New Orleans, I had to have social skills. I think there's no flex like a White guy in a senior position with no social skills. Like, How did you make it through the world without the social skills that I learned in high school to get an internship?

And so, those skills that we've learned that actually make us masterful leaders, we've had to think about: How do we have motivation to carry out the work? And what does that look like for us? We've had to think about relationships and networks as a way of driving the work. We could not do it on our own. It just wasn't an option! We had to think about our skill sets and behaviors, and, more importantly, about how we use our lived experiences—those things that if they don't kill you professionally in your 20s, they become your assets in your 30s.

I think there is something to be said about how, yes, the work is a lot harder, but I think that we're well positioned to carry it out. And the voice piece—I totally get the concept that we're introducing new ideas that require a lot more buy-in.

I also feel that nothing we're doing is remotely radical—the word *risk* is thrown around way too easily, from a world perspective. And the things that we're doing, the things that we're creating, are rooted in the American experience. Our way of thinking is maybe a different way of interpreting that experience, but there's a solid narrative that we're building upon. We're not introducing new thoughts. There's the Octavia Butler quote, “There's nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns.”<sup>8</sup> We're just introducing the same thoughts in a way that may be received as radical because of how they are framed and who they're coming from—but it's all quite straightforward. And our work is to really normalize that thinking and those thinkers. That's our flex.

**FJTC:** I wanted to come back to something you mentioned earlier, Cyndi, when you were talking about voice. You talked about living in different universes—and I've been saying a lot lately that part of the challenge in the United States and leadership at this moment is that most folks don't realize we're living in a multiverse. People are believing dramatically different truths and untruths. And I think that as people of color who have shared values, we're attempting to align some of those truths. And I think that's incredibly powerful. But I don't know that we're ever going to get away from the multiverse, from the everything everywhere all the time, and I think that strategies for the future need to account for that fact. *Because that's the world that's been designed for us.* Unless we're really going to blow it all up and get back to whatever our Indigenous roots were from across the world, I don't see a path away from having to acknowledge that these multiverses exist and intersect on a constant basis—and prepare for that. And, lead in a way that's about clearly defining boundaries for ourselves and for our communities—and building our own—while determining what the terms of engagement and the rules are with which we will work with others who don't share our values. Because to some extent, there will always be either some level of compromise or a line that we're not willing to cross.

“ We have a lot of great leaders who have been reminding us that all this shit is made up. It was made up by individuals who got in the room, decided they had power, and then told everybody else that this was what we were going to do.”

I think about some of the things that folks feel are new. When we think about gender nonconformity or trans individuals, I'm like, This isn't new. I think about the role that Sylvester played in the '70s with gender-bending. I think about Little Jimmy Scott—a largely unacknowledged (in terms of the jazz pantheon) intersex jazz artist from the 1940s and '50s who was jazz artist Nancy Wilson's original inspiration. And so, now that I'm middle-aged, I'm realizing, Ooh, this is exactly what people have been saying for forever. These cycles are pretty consistent at a 40-year clip or a 50-year clip. And so, I'm just starting to see patterns.

I think that, to Darren's point, when we start to win, and more and more people start to choose to get free, a coordinated effort begins to try to do a reset to conservatism. And that's what we're seeing with CRT [critical race theory] and the loss of the AP [Advanced Placement] African American Studies; it's what we're seeing with any of the “Don't Say Gay” and “Don't Say Black” laws that are coming up.

And all of this is a cycle. We have a lot of great leaders who have been reminding us that all this shit is made up. It was made up by individuals who got in the room, decided they had power, and then told everybody else that this was what we were going to do. Now that so many of us realize that, we are seeing leaders—like you, Cyndi—who are saying, “Look, in three years, we can make this shit different; in three years, we can make it better and stronger and more thoughtful, more nuanced, more powerful.” And there are lots of examples. I attended an online session with Sonya Renee Taylor and adrienne maree brown, two individuals who have collaborated to create an institute, the Institute for Radical Permission, that essentially provides a curriculum for individuals to embody what it means to bring back to life the pieces of ourselves that we have allowed to wither on the vine because the world—our families, religion, politics, mentors, whatever—told us we wouldn't survive if we were *that thing*.<sup>9</sup> And so, I agree with Darren that we are winning, which is why we are seeing this pushback.

**DI:** I mean, can we just stop and acknowledge that the pushback is too late? I'm serious. It's like my mother says all the time, “By the time Florida says, ‘No, we're not doing this’—honey, that ship has sailed. I appreciate your thinking on this, but that narrative has shifted. And so, your little pushback is

‘Don't Say Gay?’ Okay, good luck with that. You can try. I don't know how much it's going to work.” I joke all the time as a Gen Xer that we should be called the *Sesame Street* generation, because we are the generation whose parents were off working and who literally set us down in front of *Sesame Street*. We were raised by Big Bird and Ernie and Bert—and Mr. Rogers. These shows were radical departures from the previous generation's way of thinking. We grew up holding hands, singing songs of multiculturalism. We thought this was normal.

I'm a seventh-generation New Orleans native; my family's been in New Orleans for nine generations now. I'm the only generation that went to integrated schools. They were de jure segregated before me, de facto segregated after me. I grew up in this hippie-dippie colony—you know, “perfect integration.” I had a Black teacher with an Afro singing Beatles songs to start the day. And what happens when we looked up at some point? It was like, What happened to America? Where are these people going? And we realized, No, we were the ones in *The Truman Show*. America was off being America. We were the ones that were the experiment to some degree, right? And what a beautiful experiment it was. We normalized things that were very new; it was very radical for the time, and we thought of them as being the only option. So, we're sitting there, being like, Why can't these people live with each other? Like, Didn't we learn that in *Sesame Street*? So, in many ways the narrative has shifted already. They can push back; they can say, “Don't say *dot dot dot*”—fill in whatever people they want to put there—but it's already happened, right? And for the better! So, good luck trying to bring that back.

**FJTC:** I love hearing about your experience, Darren, and I also want to hear from Cyndi—because my experience growing up in the same generation is dramatically different from yours. I grew up in Massachusetts, and I did grow up in a largely White suburban, almost rural, town—and despite



“When I talk about multiplicity, I talk about it as a good thing. Not like we want to flatten things the way that dominant culture does; we do intersectionality beyond just the *isms* of how we are located in society, just even in terms of consciousness.”

my clear White privilege and translucence, folks did not want us there.

My first day at the bus stop, rocks were thrown at me and my brother and sister. My brother's a little darker than you, Cyndi, and to this day, when he travels home, whenever he gets pulled over by a policeman in Holliston [Massachusetts], it's always like, “Do you speak Spanish? Do you speak English?” Because his name is Joan-Pablo Torres, and he's got a California ID because he lives in San Diego. And despite pretty radical parents, I saw a portion of what I see a lot of in other Latinx communities on the West Coast. There was a tendency to conform in order to make it. And it really wasn't until my late teens, when I moved to Philadelphia and was able to integrate into a very dramatically different urban setting, that I was reminded of all of the things that you're talking about.

Growing up, I did not get an education about Indigenous communities. I did not get anything except, you know, Black folks were slaves, in my history books or US civics books. Everything else that I learned, I learned outside of school. So, Cyndi, when I referenced this idea of the cycle, I think the '60s and '70s were about people getting really free. I think in some corners of the world that are now Florida, Tennessee, and other states—but in my case, in my personal experience, I'll say in corners of even “progressive” Massachusetts—it was really effective to get young people to listen to conservative rhetoric. Even young people of color who were isolated and were just trying to find ways to make it through. For whatever that's worth.

**CS:** Wow, that's really interesting. I grew up in Roxbury, in Boston, which is a historically Black community. My family's from Puerto Rico, from Loíza, which is the Black part of Puerto Rico. My family are the artists that hold and protect Black culture. So, I grew up in a home that I didn't realize until later was unusual, where I never heard anything bad about Black people. We identified as Black. If you go to Puerto Rico

and you talk to my mom's family, they are Black, and they talk about Blackness and culture and history as if they've never heard that Black is bad. And so, that's how I grew up. And it took me a while to realize that other people didn't see it that way.

And I feel really lucky, actually, to have grown up in a home that never had anti-Blackness as part of what we were, because it's very common in Latinx communities to hear that. I mean, my family spans from, like, blond and blue-eyed to Black, Black, Black. Our families have it all. And there're all these coded ways of talking—and actually not so coded. It's common to talk about those things as if White is better, but not in my family. So, I feel really lucky.

And I grew up reading theory and sci-fi, Octavia Butler. I was so upset when I read her last book. I was like, What, there's no more? She has this story called “The Book of Martha.”<sup>10</sup> To me, it's her most amazing story, because it's a futuristic, positive story of this woman who has access to all these different levels of consciousness. So, when I talk about multiplicity, I talk about it as a good thing. Not like we want to flatten things the way that dominant culture does; we do intersectionality beyond just the *isms* of how we are located in society, just even in terms of consciousness.

When I think about our writers [at NPQ], I feel like they need the kind of space that you're describing—where people can actually *grapple*. And right now we're thinking we need to form that, because people are so eager to talk and to speak and to write, but a lot of folks don't seem to have the spaces to actually think beyond the way they're currently embedded. Even if they dream a certain way, it's almost like sometimes it falls down when they try to put it into writing. So, we've been trying to figure out how we can support that in some way—because we're a media company, right? And so for us, I feel like the boundaries of what we do keep getting stretched, because of how we're doing it.

Last year, we did a VoiceLab—a yearlong writing program.<sup>11</sup> That was in response to people from the field calling me up as soon as I started writing. When I first came to NPQ, I had just written my book on power.<sup>12</sup> And I was like, I'm not going to write the way the rest of the people at NPQ write; I'm going to write the way I *think*—what I wish NPQ was doing. So I

“I think that we spend so much of our time trying to figure out what’s the narrative that we want to tell and how everyone feeds that narrative that sometimes we rob ourselves of the richness that is our community.”

started writing, and really quickly I started to get people responding. And people were like, “You have to do something about what you’re writing. You can’t just write about it.” So, it was immediate pushback. I was like, I spent my whole life trying to get to the point where I can just write, and people want me now to stop and go back to doing program work? But it’s been constantly that, you know?

And I remember going out to different conferences during that time when I first started, and having a lot of people of color come up to me and tell me—all of them with tears in their eyes—that they too had once wanted to write, but that their life didn’t allow that. And so there was a lot of emotion around writing, and I was like, Wow, this is really deep. Everything got really intense. It wasn’t just writing. Everything that I did, everything, the response, it was so deeply emotional. It was almost like you had to recover, you had to make space for it, it hurt. And so, finally, when I began to get all these calls, before I started a VoiceLab, it started off with people asking me, “Can you coach me on developing my voice?” People just started using that term, from all over the country. Not like they talked to or knew each other. They weren’t using the word *brand*, which is what people used to say back in the day, right? It was like, “You’ve got to develop your brand.” Now everybody had started to use the word *voice*. And I said, “Okay, let’s start a VoiceLab.” A funder heard about it, called me up, and said, “We heard you want to start a voice lab. We have people who want to go—here’s some money.” I mean, it was just like the stuff that we were creating *wanted* to be created. So we did the VoiceLab for a year. We did three months of a deep dive at the beginning, six months of production, three months of distribution. And it was really hard for people to switch from the visioning to the production. It was like, people were mad! In my experience, it’s amazing work. It’s not just writing work—it’s ritual work. And I feel like it really is pushing the boundaries of what we do.

**DI:** Cyndi, I think what you’re talking about is really interesting. I’m reminded of the angel Kyodo Williams quote, “Love is space.”<sup>13</sup> And so, for so many of us, it’s about creating space for folks to be. And I do also recognize this as a tension. As a consultant, I’m trained toward data—you give me two data points, I will give you a line. That’s my job. And we’re good at doing that—that’s what we’re here for, right?

At the same time, I think in some ways success can be demonstrating the plurality of a community. Particularly for communities of color, I think that we spend so much of our time trying to figure out what’s the narrative that we want to tell and how everyone feeds that narrative that sometimes we rob ourselves of the richness that is our community. And I wonder how much your job, Cyndi, from a storytelling perspective, is to give us all the space to tell our various stories—where they intersect, and they mostly do, or where they don’t, to some degree. I think that there’s something very powerful in that.

New Orleans was a Black city—a Black ass city—particularly when I was there in the ’80s and ’90s—and I grew up in a Black home. And I joke all the time about how my parents made an active choice to pull me out of the Black Jesuit school for kindergarten and put me in the integrated hippie-dippie school for first grade. And my grandmother was so worried that I’d be meeting White people. We have various White people and various Black people—all the shades. It’s New Orleans, right? But I’d never really had any interactions with White people. They were there. You saw them—I saw them on TV, really. But you live in a Black community, go to a Black school.

That was success, particularly for middle-class Black families—it was success to create your world where you didn’t have to be bothered with White people to some degree. And if you were privileged enough to do all the things—from grocery shopping to banking to schooling—without having to deal with White people, that was success.

**CS:** Heaven.

**DI:** Listen. Seriously, right? And so, I remember my grandmother sat me down, was like, “You’re going to this school where people are different from you. It’s important for you to respect their differences and for them to respect your differences.” Well, I didn’t know what she was talking about. And

“We’re a world of narratives. We’re

Americans. This country’s a bunch of crazy fake narratives, right? Where the narrative is helpful, hold on to it—where it isn’t, let it go.”

so, I had been at the school for a few months, and my mother kept asking questions, trying to figure out what it was like for me to go to school with White folks. I had this one lighter-skinned aunt who was from this random neighborhood in New Orleans called Gentilly—we were from Uptown New Orleans, so, in my mind, Gentilly was the other side of the world. And my mom was like, “How’s your teacher?” I was like, “Oh, I think she’s great. I think she’s from Gentilly.” My mom asks, “How is your school best friend?” “Oh,” I say, “He’s great. I think he’s from Gentilly.” And at some point, my mother realized that I thought White people were just light-skinned Black people from Gentilly.

So, whereas everyone else can talk about the first time they realized that they were Black, I can share the first time I realized that everybody *wasn’t* Black. My parents had to explain to me, “No, those aren’t Black people, those are White people.” To me, White people were the people you saw on TV. But there were a lot of things on TV that weren’t real. Santa Claus was White on TV. Folks are eating tuna casserole on TV—that clearly wasn’t real. (I was in New Orleans; nobody was eating tuna casserole, right?) So, there were all these things that were fictional on TV, and I thought White people were fictional, too.

We’re a world of narratives. We’re Americans. This country’s a bunch of crazy fake narratives, right? Where the narrative is helpful, hold on to it—where it isn’t, let it go.

**FJTC:** A thing that I’ll always hold on to: as a young person, whenever there would be conflict between me and a friend, my mom would always say to me, “You have to remember, you’ve learned what a galaxy is, you’ve learned what a universe is. Every brain is its own universe. And you have to engage with it as such and not expect any of it to map over yours.”

And I share that to be able to loop back, because you have both shared some childhood stories. And Cyndi, similarly to yours: My mom was one of 16; my dad was one of eight.

And my mom got ridiculed—she’s one of the youngest—because she’s the only one in the family that married another light-skinned Puerto Rican. And so the family, still to this day, tells my mom, “Dañastes la raza!” [you’ve ruined our race]—because she lightened the next generation’s skin. So, Blackness and Indigeneity were what was valued in my family. And also, out of the 24 aunts and uncles who each had three kids, including my brother and sister, I’m the only one ever born outside of the island of Puerto Rico. So, my existence as a child was that I didn’t belong in the White spaces in Holliston, Massachusetts, but I would go back to Puerto Rico and I would get teased by everybody and reminded about how terrible the United States was, and reminded that Blackness was the goal, Indigeneity was the goal. And, “You’re too American,” and, “You’re too White,” were the things that I heard growing up. And so, I often share a metaphor inspired by the artist Ceci Méndez-Ortiz.<sup>14</sup> She’s a crazy-beautiful artist—she’s been doing a lot of work with Ekuia Holmes, a name that might be more familiar to you.<sup>15</sup> But as an artist, she has explored that same intersection of not being from here nor there and how you create spaces where you do belong. And often, it’s first in our own head. And the metaphor that she ended up using in her artistic practice was an amphibian: I know how to swim underwater, and I have fish that are friends, and I know how to function and breathe on land. And I have friends that are bears, but I live in a world where my bear friends sometimes eat my fish friends, and I have to figure out how to reconcile these things. I’m not from here and I’m not from there, but I can figure out how to maneuver and navigate across all of these worlds.

For whatever that’s worth in this conversation, as I think about how I apply that in my leadership practice, and I think about dreaming for the future—for me, the way that Darren and you were talking about Reverend angel’s quote about “space,” that love is actually creating space, I just want to double down on that. And allowing people to make sense of the world and come to a comfortability in their own knowledge, in their own story, in their own skin in a way that this world doesn’t usually make easy for people to do.

That’s the future of leadership for me: creating spaces that allow people to fully enter as who they are, understanding their value, and figuring out how the puzzle pieces shift so

that everybody is always fully who they are and feeling welcome and able to contribute the best of who they are.

**DI:** I think that value piece is so important and powerful. And I joke about my thinking that White people were just light-skinned Black people from Gentilly, but I really had no sense of White people thinking that they were better than me. None of that made any sense to me. It was the most ridiculous idea. I had no mental models to accommodate White supremacy, honestly. So, I think there's something to be said about, How do you have the sense of empowerment around who you are? Recognizing who you are is really important.

I had a conversation with David Thomas some many moons ago. He's the president of Morehouse College, and it was one of those conversations where you're interviewing someone about something else and they start dropping gems. You're like, Let me take out my notebook, because this brother's dropping gems—I've got to write some of this down. He offered this path to success for a person of color or anyone from a marginalized group. And it was a three-step process. The first was figuring out what makes you different—from a cultural perspective, from a life perspective, from a story and narrative perspective—and being proud of that. The second step was finding yourself at an organization or company where your difference is critical to the success of the organization, to its work. Not a *nice to have*, not a *side have*, but a *without it, success won't happen*. And the third, which was the most interesting, was surrounding yourself with people who encourage you to hold on to your difference in service of success.

And it was funny, because as he said it, I could think of folks I knew for whom something happened at each step, right? Like, the first were people who never really understood what made them different. There was a rush for assimilation, there was a rush to show who they were, or they weren't proud of that difference—they were ashamed, and they went to the whole, you know, Yoshino, the hiding and covering piece.<sup>16</sup> The second were people who landed at places that told them their difference was important—but it wasn't. They got beat up for it, and they were never really able to use their difference in a way that drove success—it wasn't really appreciated. And the third were folks who landed jobs where their difference was important, but they lost their

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difference—where basically, in the process, it was too hard to hold on to their difference, and so they ended up turning into the things that they were trying to avoid.

I think of those three pieces in terms of the knowledge work that I lead at Bridgespan: How do I give lessons in each of those? What makes you different, and why is your difference critical to success? And here's a community of folks who are going to allow you to hold on to it. I think that if we can respect that in our thinking, that's how we get to impact; that's how we get to success; and that's how we create that second bucket—that's how we create that second bucket that's different from where we are but is rooted in those values that anchor where we want to be.

**CS:** When I started to write my book, I spent years researching. I looked across 10 fields of research, from the Vedic scriptures to neuroendocrinology, and they all said the same thing: that what triggers power dynamics is difference—not just a perception of difference but one's *relationship* to difference. And it was the first time I realized that I loved difference. And you know how people are always like, 10 percent of people are this or 10 percent of people are that? I was like, There must be 10 percent of people who love difference, because most people don't. So, I love what you're saying about difference. I pulled aside this article to read today. It was Walter Mosley saying the United States is getting dumber.<sup>17</sup> And I think that there's just such a fear of difference right now, and it actually does make you really dumb. I think there's a desire to squash difference in organizations.

But I like what you're saying, Darren—because in terms of writing at NPQ, as soon as I came into this role, I started to talk about multivocality, that what we were editing for was not uniformity. But I don't know what it is—like you were saying—that happens to people on the way. It is hard for people to hold on to their difference, and to even know what it is. I think it's interesting that the three of us had some

experiences in our lives—it seems like that’s a commonality between us—that no matter what the circumstances and the differences in how we grew up, there was a love of Blackness in some ways. Which is actually really not common. And how do the three of us have that in common no matter what our crazy-different circumstances?

**DI:** And I do wonder how that love of Blackness and that love of our difference—even though I don’t know if I thought I was different—becomes something that you feed. It becomes something that you naturally justify in your thinking. How do you create a mental model around that? And I think about all the things that I just *had*—my parents were giving me just crazy mental models—now that I realize the work that they did to give me alternative narratives.

And I remember when my teacher would read Shel Silverstein to us when I was in second or third grade—Miss Antosca, bless her, she was a wonderful White woman, a great teacher. I didn’t learn that Shel Silverstein was White until I was in college. There was this picture of him, and he looked like a light-skinned Black man to me (from Gentilly, of course). And so, in my mind, when I looked at the back of the book and there was this Black poet, *I could be a poet.*

So, the mental models that I’d created—that I’ve spent my life feeding into—I’m so thankful in some ways that I had normalized these very abnormal narratives. But I wonder how much of that was just this love of Blackness, this love of cosmopolitanism (small c), this love of urban spaces, cultural appreciation—xenophilia. That was something that was embedded in me early; and so, as a result, everything fed into that—everything was used as justification for that at an early age and through life.

**CS:** As we wrap up, I would love to bring this back to the three organizations. I’m wondering if there’s a connection there.

**FJTC:** Part of what I was going to bring up at this particular moment was to come back to this Latinx connection and the comment that you made of folks who have a difficult time hanging onto difference. One of the things that’s been concerning me, Cyndi, is that more and more, as I read the news about the folks who were involved in January 6, the folks who are leading nationalist movements and White supremacist movements, I’m seeing Latino last names.

**CS:** I know. They’re leading this, yeah.

**FJTC:** And I was talking to a couple of AAPI friends of mine, and they’re like, “Oh, no, the same thing is happening in our community.” It’s about proximity to Whiteness, and it’s about shame. So, I bring that back to the three organizations and to thinking about the preconditions that allow for humans to believe in and build a different world. And shame is something we need to do away with. It’s not a useful emotion, and traditionally it is at the root of people seeking power and control over others—being greedy and believing that material items and/or control and title or positionality make them better, because you’re ashamed of whatever the difference is. You’re seeking to conform to a system that tells you that this is what success looks like. And so, I think about those who are either leading nationalist movements or who are just trying to get through the day to day and figure out where the next meal is coming from or how they pay rent.

There’s just a lot of healing that we need to do in order, I think, to build a critical mass of individuals who are prepared to do what Deborah talks about in her Two-Loop Theory, which is to walk out and build something new. Whether those folks want to go back to a historic context of Indigenous community living, or maroon community strategies, as they’ve existed throughout this country and throughout the planet, or whether folks really want to figure out if there are pieces of how our ancestors lived that we can couple with pieces of our lives today and build something that’s totally new and rooted in care and love.

And the last piece that I’ll share here is—well, two pieces: Bridgit Antoinette Evans, from Pop Culture Collab,<sup>18</sup> has talked about a narrative strategy along these lines of, How do we just begin to stop the Black and White conversation? We’re all Indigenous. We all come from either a Celtic tribe, or a Taíno tribe, or an Indigenous tribe in the United States, or an Indigenous tribe from the continent of Africa or from somewhere in South America. And if we actually just took a little bit of time to get back to those roots and what those communities were, we might be able to find more common ground. And the other thing I want to mention is that this idea of futurism and the folks that have been pushing this—I think we all know—is also not new. I don’t want to pretend that it is. Makani Themba is somebody I have deep respect for who has been facilitating these dialogues in communities of color for a long time.<sup>19</sup> Contemporary individuals who I deeply love and admire and respect are doing this over and over again: Sage Crump, Aisha Shillingford. . . .<sup>20</sup>

**“I feel there is something very powerful in the fact that, as we consider that second type of organization and this future thinking and creating this future world, there are those of us who were created for this conversation. I think there are those of us who have literally spent our lives thinking about what's next.”**

**CS:** What do you say, Darren?

**DI:** When I think about this work, I feel there is something very powerful in the fact that, as we consider that second type of organization and this future thinking and creating this future world, there are those of us who were created for this conversation. I think there are those of us who have literally spent our lives thinking about what's next. I think that's our role. That's our responsibility. I think it's important for us to live into that and for us to honor those folks who are doing it.

I think that the Afrofuturism conversation is not a new one. Obviously, we can list all the folks that Javier talked about. I mean, Black people have been dreaming about a future since the beginning of time. I think we're the only community where success is not imagined in a lifetime. Black leaders from the beginning of time have been talking about what our children are going to be doing. From mountaintop speeches to Harriet Tubman to Frederick Douglass to the founding fathers—the Black Founding Fathers, if you will. I think that this work is one that's always been happening.

I think that we live in the fullness of time, where we just have to carry the baton and think about what the work is to carry it forward. I think it's important for us to recognize the power of narratives in changing this work. And I was going to quote Bridgit, only because in my conversations with her, she talks a lot about the marriage equality movement from a narrative change perspective—and lots of things that were flawed about it we can talk about another day—but also how there was something really powerful about ultimately figuring out: Who were the folks who were important for success within the movement? And how do we give people mental models and roadmaps and examples of what success looks like for them? How do we tell a conservative White grandpa in Arkansas that it's okay for him to love his gay grandson? How do we give him space? How do we normalize that? And we see it play out! We see the commercials now, where grandpa's putting makeup on his gender-transitioning grandchild. We're giving people space that this can be you! Right? This is what it looks like to change your ways or to live into it.

So, I think so much of this work is about our looking into the future, to some degree—figuring out what the future world needs to look like, or at least what the anchors of that future

world are, and then figuring out how we give people the mental roadmaps to get there. A sense of belonging in that conversation and in that space. Because I think once people have belonging in a space, once people feel like they've fingerprinted that space, they live into it very naturally. And we're a country of narratives.

I think the other conversation we need to have at some other point is, How do we bridge that first bucket and the second bucket? How do we give the folks on the frontline the space to dream? And I think that that's a very powerful space, because those are the people who have the solutions that are real. And those are the people who actually in many ways are the most genius, if given the space to think and to build and to own what we're trying to build. So, those are thoughts that come to mind for me.

**CS:** This is so great. I'm walking away with this kind of juxtaposition. We started off thinking about organizations, and we are leaving talking about that what's needed is space. And so I almost feel like I want to start a whole other conversation about that. But it's really fascinating that everything has been about space and not about organizations or structure, even though we started off talking about it like that. So, I don't know what to make of it. I feel like I need to think about that.

**FJTC:** I was just going to say, it's a piece of this idea that space is the type of culture that I'm trying to cultivate inside of organizations now.

**CS:** That's what I'm trying to figure out. How do you?

**FJTC:** It's what you're doing, Cyndi. It's where you are. It's what you're seeing happen. It's why all of these people are saying to you, “I need my voice cultivated.” And you can take

“How do we engage in this work with love? Love for ourselves, love for our communities. Because ultimately, at the end of the day, all that’s done in love is done well.”

advantage of that because of the way that you’ve created space in your organization to be responsive to people’s differences and to people’s desires. You are a really great example.

**DI:** I found the angel Kyodo Williams quote, so I can read it to you guys. It’s really powerful, and it’s from her *On Being* interview.<sup>21</sup> She’s the author of *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*.<sup>22</sup> And she says, for growing numbers of us “our sense of survival, our sense of thriving is embedded in a sense of movement and spaciousness and increasing allowance for more and more difference.” She says, “[L]ove is space. It is developing our own capacity for spaciousness within ourselves to allow others to be as they are. . . . [T]o come from a place of love is to be in acceptance of what is, even in the face of moving it towards something that is more whole, more just, more spacious for all of us.”<sup>23</sup> It’s a beautiful quote, and it gets to this idea of love, this idea of spaces as an act of love. I think it also gets at: How do we engage in this work with love? Love for ourselves, love for our communities. Because ultimately, at the end of the day, all that’s done in love is done well.

I think from a nonprofit and a philanthropic perspective, you engage very differently with communities, with people, going back to *ourselves*. Black love is when you *love* them. A lot of folks are out here treating communities like patients, and they don’t have no bedside manner. When you love someone, and you see the full potential that comes with that love, you interact with folks very differently: your expectations are higher, all the things are higher. And so, I think it’s spaciousness, but it’s also spaciousness as an act of love and not an act of neglect.

**FJTC:** So, what I would say, Cyndi, coming back to the organizational piece, is: How do we encourage folks—if we are going to talk about organizations—to actually understand we’re all in the same ecosystem? And how much more powerful could each of our lines of work be if we coordinated and

created space to dream and imagine with each other? But that means then that we have to come back to budgets and money and philanthropy. And so, it’s a piece that I never forget.

I was working with Gibrán Rivera and Maanav Thakore when I was working at the Boston Foundation,<sup>24</sup> and we started to pull a bunch of organizations together, and I said, “Listen, y’all. You’re so tired of philanthropy telling you what you should be doing or what you need to do. Why don’t each of you just commit to, as a collective, that in every grant you write, you’re going to put \$5,000 of research and development expenses in your submission? And let’s see over time, in a year or two years, how much this aggregates? And can everybody in the room just commit to that whatever you raise in your R&D line items, you’re putting it into a collective pool for nonprofits to (a) dream and coordinate but also (b) study philanthropy? As opposed to allowing philanthropy to study us—how do we just shift the positionality?” But of course, it requires time and space, and in the world that we’re living in, that time and space are facilitated by resources.

And so, this is also about philanthropy learning to value that the love that needs to be given is not going to be tied to a program—is not going to be tied to a direct impact in our generation, in our lifetime, in the time that we’re in our roles. But it really is about the cultivation of space for real transformation that requires much more than what we are used to giving.

**CS:** Wow, this is amazing. For me, I feel like I’m always trying to cultivate space in my consciousness and in my day, so, I’m always trying figure out, What do I not need to do? I’m almost protective of it. And I’m really left with this idea of like, How do we . . . I don’t want to say *institutionalize* it, because I feel like it’s an oxymoron—and I feel like even the idea of organizations really limits what’s beyond that. So, I’m walking away from this thinking of the space beyond, where we dream about things being in it—but right now it’s a space with nothing in it, because whatever I’m thinking maybe can’t come ’til I’m there. You know what I mean? Everything from here makes you think grants, organization, structure—but I’m like, Wow, it really is how to cultivate space. So, thank you so much. This has been amazing, and I hope we do more of it.

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