



# Meeting the Moment, Keeping the Momentum

Stories of Racial Equity and Liberatory  
Practices from the Field



A Report by Borealis Philanthropy and Research Action Design 2024



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## RACIAL EQUITY AND JUSTICE PRACTITIONERS

Aja Couchois Duncan, [Change Elemental](#)

Ámate Pérez, [Latinx Racial Equity Project \(LREP\)](#)

Amy Herzfeld-Copple, [Western States Center](#)

Anisha Desai, [AORTA](#)

Anouska Bhattacharyya, [YW Boston](#)

Autumn Brown, [AORTA](#)

Cynthia Silva Parker, [Interaction Institute for Social Change \(IISC\)](#)

Dee Washington, [Circle Forward](#)

Elissa Sloan Perry, [Change Elemental](#)

Heidi Lopez, [LREP](#)

J Miakoda Taylor, [Fierce Allies](#)

Jessica Vazquez Torres, [Crossroads Antiracism Organizing and Training](#)

Judy Lubin, [Center for Urban and Racial Equity \(CURE\)](#)

Kelly Bates, [IISC](#)

Kyla Hartsfield, [CompassPoint Nonprofit Services \(CompassPoint\)](#)

Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz, [RoadMap Consulting](#)

Liz Derias, [CompassPoint](#)

Maggie Potapchuk, [MP Associates](#)

Mala Nagarajan, [Vega Mala Consulting](#)

Maro Guevara, [CompassPoint](#)

Mattice Haynes, [Liberatory Power & Consulting Group](#)

Mindy Kao, [Liberatory Power & Consulting Group](#)

Neily Jennings, [AORTA](#)

Noah Krus, [Crossroads](#)

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## **PARTNERS & CLIENTS**

Queta González, [Center for Diversity & the Environment \(CDE\)](#)

Richael Faithful, [Healing Justice Practitioner](#)

Ron White, [Humboldt Area Foundation](#)

Simone Thelemaque, [CompassPoint](#)

Steve Lew, [CompassPoint](#)

Tanya Pluth, [CDE](#)

Tracy Kunkler, [Circle Forward](#)

Vanessa Bird, [CDE](#)

Yee Won Chong, [Western States Center](#)

Zhaleh Afshar, [AORTA](#)

Fatima Ahmad, [DC Greens](#)

Johana Bencomo, [Women's Democracy Lab](#)

Lisa Donahue, [Nature Connection Network](#)

Lucia Colombaro, [Ethos Evolution Institute](#) and [Nature Connection Network](#)

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Melissa Meiris, [Stepping Stone Consulting](#)

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## PROJECT TEAM

This research project was led by Research Action Design in collaboration with the Racial Equity to Accelerate Change Fund (REACH) team at Borealis Philanthropy.

**Research Action Design (RAD)** builds the power of grassroots social movements through codesign, technology development, and community research. Our participatory approach is grounded in curiosity and compassion, threading together RAD's deep skillsets across a range of disciplines with the knowledge and expertise of communities directly impacted by systemic violence and inequity. RAD builds long-term relationships with organizations and organizers to support mobilizing and activating communities to realize their visions for systems change and cultural transformation. Find more information about RAD at <https://rad.cat>.



**Borealis Philanthropy** is a social justice philanthropic intermediary working to resource grassroots movements for transformative change, and build bridges between funders and organizers to support movements working to make a future that serves all of us.

Founded in 2015, Borealis has grown to include collaborative funds working to enhance our collective impact within and between movements across the country. From Black-led movement-building, to queer and trans liberation, to disability justice and inclusion, Borealis' work is rooted in the understanding that in order to upend oppressive systems, we must support the people most impacted by those systems. Within Borealis, the Racial Equity to Accelerate Change (REACH) Fund is focused on expanding the capacity of racial equity consultants to work with nonprofit organizations. The Fund invests in practitioners to develop and scale tools and strategies for the benefit of the nonprofit sector. Find more information about Borealis Philanthropy at <https://borealisphilanthropy.org>.



## RESEARCH JUSTICE CO-DESIGN PROCESS & METHODS

The case study project for the Racial Equity to Accelerate Change Fund (REACH) is a research and evaluation co-design project, with an orientation to Research Justice. The research methods used in this report not only recognize the expertise of racial equity/ racial justice practitioners (sometimes referred to as REACH cohort members in this report) but also engage practitioners directly throughout the research process.



In the Fall of 2022, Research Action Design (RAD) and the REACH team at Borealis Philanthropy launched the co-design phase of the project. During this phase, the teams outlined the initial vision, design logic, research domains and questions, and audiences for the report. A draft design was presented to the REACH cohort to help shape the design logic, research domains, and audiences. During the co-design session, the REACH cohort advised the team to refine the design logic to be more reflective of liberatory practices, calling out that there is no master narrative or one way of doing this work and a need to lean into multiple stories as well as allowing for community building and peer learning among the REACH cohort.

Based on the co-design phase of the project, the design logic was modified to include three listening sessions (held in March 2023), each focusing on either healing justice or network/ cohort models. Following the listening sessions, the RAD team conducted 21 individual and small group interviews with both REACH cohort practitioners (from May to June 2023) and their partners and the clients they serve (held in July 2023), along with demographic survey data from interviewees. In addition to an open call to all cohort practitioners, specific interviewees were also proposed by the project team based on participation and stories shared during the listening sessions. REACH cohort practitioners identified partners (or “clients”) who were interviewed. After the data collection phase, a preliminary thematic synthesis of findings was prepared for review by the REACH cohort and the REACH team at Borealis Philanthropy.

In August 2023, a participatory analysis session with the REACH cohort was held to present and review the preliminary themes captured based on the co-design session, listening sessions, and interviews. The aims of the participatory analysis session and the review period that followed were to gather practitioner feedback on what the RAD team heard. Following the analysis of the preliminary themes, a draft narrative report was shared with all participants in the project for review and confirmation of their quotes and narrative. The narrative report culminates the listening sessions, interviews, and thematic synthesis review process with practitioners and their partners and clients. The participatory analysis session and the narrative report review and confirmation process (from September to December 2023) were used to refine and finalize the narrative report.





It was through this community-led process that it became clear that this research would not lead to a single case study. Therefore the report does contain more, and there are many other stories that we believe can and need to be told and heard. There is no single path.

The stories highlighted in this report provide a reality-based overview of the life cycle of racial equity organizational development (RE OD) work from the perspective of REACH Fund grantee racial equity practitioners and the non-profit leaders and organizations they

support in this journey toward justice and liberation. We hope the stories shared in the report can be a learning tool and help demystify what it takes to conduct this work and the variations and evolution of what RE OD work looks like today and moving forward.



# 01

## 01. INTRODUCTION

Founded in 2019, The Racial Equity to Accelerate Change (REACH) Fund is a donor collaborative fund housed at Borealis Philanthropy that invests in seasoned racial equity practitioners - capacity builders, facilitators, and healers - to disrupt white supremacy culture in our organizations and movements, and move courageously towards liberatory practices that will disrupt and rebuild our systems. The racial equity (RE) practitioners work closely alongside nonprofit leaders and organizations to apply a racial equity lens towards dismantling institutional racism, building race-conscious organizations, and designing internal and external strategy, policy, and cultural change. REACH's investments have been critical to these practitioners as they have deepened relationships with their stakeholders while simultaneously developing new tools and practices in the wake of renewed attacks from the far-right that are chipping away at progressive gains including affirmative action, reproductive rights, voting access and body autonomy. In addition, consolidation of corporate interests continues to enrich extractive industries and promote monopolies. These continuing political assaults are a predictable systemic response to our resistance, and they behoove us to fight back harder and more collectively.

The REACH Fund and Borealis Philanthropy believes that when racial equity is fully integrated into the policies and practices of nonprofits and philanthropic organizations, this will lead to more resources invested in communities of color and their power-building efforts. Well-resourced community-driven organizing and advocacy on social justice issues will allow grassroots movements to grow their impact and more effectively carry out strategies on the ground to close the gaps for those facing disparities.

### **When nonprofit leaders declare commitments to racial equity and justice, what does that journey really entail?**

Both RE practitioners and their nonprofit clients stress that the work of racial equity requires deep transformation and alignment at multiple levels—individual, interpersonal, organizational, and movement ecosystem. There is no one blueprint or logic model. The work is not linear, and it is often interrupted by discomfort, conflicts, and even harm.

### **How do RE practitioners, then, help their clients navigate these uncertainties, while not losing heart or momentum?**

The practitioners supported by REACH hail from different but interlocking strands of social justice lineages and have divergent specializations in organizational development areas, with each continuing to innovate based on new and emerging realities. One commonality among them is their long-term investment in trust-building, courageous conversations, and patience with their clients. Quick fixes or short-term contracts often backfire.

REACH is a laboratory where the RE practitioners experiment in new and innovative ways of organizing themselves in order to dismantle white supremacy, racial capitalism, and various forms of intersectional oppressions, so that we can embody the liberation we seek. More than dismantling the old, the RE practitioners are working with movement organizations to build a just society where joyful and thriving people and communities that are in right relationships with each other and the planet can share power and resources equitably. Since there is no one blueprint, this report documents multiple (but not exhaustive) promising practices through interviews with the practitioners and their client organizations. Many of the RE

practitioners talked about the way the nonprofit sector is organized often hampers their work, and how the ways of the “[nonprofit industrial complex](#)” are not working. In fact, **the ways that most nonprofit organizations operate, organize themselves, compensate their staff, and compete with each other for funding replicate the racist and economic inequities and power distributions of dominant white-supremacist, cis-hetero-patriarchal, and ableist values that limit marginalized people’s access to power and decision-making.** Noting that this nonprofit industrial complex is deeply entrenched by a philanthropic sector that reinforces scarcity and competition and prizes short-term productivity over long-term vision, many RE practitioners believe this moment calls for a bolder political stance that centers racial equity to counter the tides of white supremacy (beyond putting out public statements condemning it). In this report, REACH cohort partners and their clients emphasize the foundational liberatory practices of **inner transformation** to mirror the change we want to see in the world and the **decolonization of the nonprofit and philanthropic industrial complex.** They also lift up **political education, inclusive governance, healing engagements, and field building** as liberatory practices central to the long term success of their work. The report offers several case studies on these topics, illustrating the hard and challenging work of racial equity, the complex and nuanced ways practitioners and their clients collaborate, and the rewards from alignment and progress.

Recent political developments have created an opening and a public awareness of racial equity discourse, but perhaps because of unrealistic expectations about progress and outcomes,

this window is showing some signs of closing. Without deep alignment and collective organizing and advocacy among the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, we will continue to risk fatigue, complacency, and further backlash. Racial equity practitioners are often the preventive glue in this ecosystem. To counter pushback from more resourced oppositions, practitioners have to be innovative, rigorous, and accountable. There is also a need to create networked relationships among practitioners to articulate, refine, and amplify liberatory practices.

But this report is also intended for other actors in the movement building ecosystem. For funders, meeting this moment requires critically examining power dynamics in philanthropy and building authentic trust with those on the front lines. For nonprofit organizations, this report shows that vulnerability, transparency, inclusiveness, and liberation are possible even within the constraints of the nonprofit sector. **But transformation is complex and only within reach if it is rooted in courageous conversations, justice, and healing.** We hope this report will help our different audiences to not only seize this opening and stay the course, but also double down on our commitment to the work and inspire moral leadership and imagination.

# 02

## 02. THE DIVERSITY OF LIBERATORY PRACTICES



The diversity of organizational development that RE practitioners work on can make it hard to define different liberatory approaches and practices. As Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz at RoadMap Consulting says, “Some people are doing finance, some people are doing strategy, some people are doing development, some people are doing fundraising, but they’re all really looking at it from a liberatory lens.” Weiner-Mahfuz believes that there is now “a critical mass of us across the progressive and radical capacity building sector to ground what [liberatory practice] means.”

From engaging the RE practitioners in the REACH cohort, there emerges a common thread in this diversity of approaches. Cynthia Silva Parker at Interaction Institute for Social Change sums it up nicely: “All of this is with an eye towards how you help people tap into their own deepest held values and see the humanity of other people. So it isn’t just technically rewriting policies or redoing job descriptions or reworking an org structure or a communications system. It really is trying to get people to connect at a head level and at a heart level with one another, and with the depth of the work itself.”

Aja Couchois Duncan and Elissa Sloan Perry at Change Elemental have an analogy for liberatory practices. In their essay, “People Stitching

Earth: Oppression, Healing, Liberation, and Navigating the Terrain In Between,” they write, “There are many ways to traverse the multi-faceted and challenging terrain created by the delusion of white supremacy, but overall the best possible paths are moving in the direction of intersectional racial equity that engages people and systems in practices of healing and liberation. We liken this process to a journey in the woods. There are a number of recognizable clearings or places that support visibility and understanding. And it is in these clearings that clarity, commitment, and learning is possible.”<sup>1</sup>

Duncan also likens inequity to “a disease that’s running through everything; it’s so poisonous” and describes their work at Change Elemental as helping “people be more authentic with each other to grapple with real live stuff in real time.” She adds, “That means everything they do is better.” To her, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts that focus on discrete technical pieces, like the job description and organizational charts, miss the point. Duncan says, “It’s like painting your nails when what you really need is a full body detox.”

A liberatory approach to organizational development, to these RE practitioners, needs to be holistic, tending to both the technical and transformational. Referencing Maurice Mitchell’s essay about resilient organizations<sup>2</sup>,

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1 Sloan Perry, Elissa, and Aja Couchios Duncan. “People Stitching Earth | Oppression, Healing, Liberation, and Navigating the Terrain in Between” (blog). <https://changeelemental.org/resources/people-stitching-earth/>.

2 Maurice Mitchell, “Building Resilient Organizations,” *The Forge*, November 29, 2022. <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/building-resilient-organizations>

Steve Lew at CompassPoint says, “For many organizations, even those with social justice values, the emphasis is to focus on hard skills. And that led to deprioritizing or not valuing political analysis. On the other hand, other groups that are steeped in political work may not have attended to the kind of development that young leaders needed around some of the technical skills or just the experience of leading. That’s where I feel like CompassPoint, even more so now, tries to bring those two together.”

There are different liberatory approaches and they are not mutually exclusive. All of the RE practitioners in the REACH cohort use a combination of approaches. This section discusses six approaches that connect the heart and the head in order to create more value alignment in people’s work and to foster an equitable culture, not only for individual organizations, but the broader movement ecosystem.

They include: 1) doing the inner work to walk the talk; 2) decolonizing the nonprofit industrial complex; 3) political education; 4) holistic healing, repair, and rehumanizing; 5) inclusive governance; and 6) field building and networked ecologies.

## 02 A. LIBERATORY PRACTICES - UNLEARNING

The first two liberatory practices—doing the inner work to walk the talk and decolonizing the nonprofit industrial complex—are about unlearning previously unexamined attitudes, values, and practices, like [white supremacy culture](#), that keep individual leaders and organizations from advancing equity and liberation in our communities. Dismantling these barriers are foundational, essential to building a more equitable organization or movement ecosystem. Because these habits are so entrenched that they almost become second nature to many, dismantling them requires explicit intentions, persistence, self-reflection, collective alignment, and grace. Challenging the status quo in the nonprofit sector also calls for courage and creativity.

### 02 A.1 DOING THE INNER WORK TO WALK THE TALK

At a time when even corporations are spouting rhetoric about diversity, equity and inclusion without an antiracist lens, the social change sector needs a deeper transformation. Nonprofit organizations are driven by their social mission. When an organization’s internal culture replicates racist practices—such as pay inequity, undemocratic governance, and elitist exclusion—it creates a misalignment





in values that makes it impossible to effect the kind of social change it claims to want in the community it serves. Some organizations, especially ones that are traditionally white-led, began their racial equity journey with an “implosion” caused by this misalignment. Catalyzing change outside requires self-examination and inner transformation.

Fatimah Ahmad at DC Greens, a nonprofit organization in Washington D.C. that advances health equity by building a just and resilient food system, says, “In 2018, we realized that we could not do the work of improving health outcomes without understanding more deeply what the impact of systemic racism and oppression had on all of us.” As a result, DC

**“ Sometimes we think about racial justice work as the fight on the street. What’s the policy fight, what’s the advocacy fight? How are we shifting the conditions for people? All of that is part and parcel of racial justice work. And I also think that organizational transformation is part of racial justice work, and that’s not always a story that gets highlighted.**

**Liz Derias-Tyehimba**  
CompassPoint



Greens enlisted the help of RE practitioners to engage staff in courageous conversations about how racism plays out in the power dynamics in the organization. Ahmad says, “For example, one of the responsibilities we now list in our job description is that people examine their power and privilege as a regular part of working in our organization because without a very basic equity analysis, people are not going to be able to do the work that they are here to do.”

Capitalistic pressures, like funding structures that encourage competition and prize conformity, often reproduce how organizations compensate and treat their workers. Later sections elaborate on different ways of changing this organizational culture, but it has to start with self-examination and inner transformation. The DC Greens example is just one of many where nonprofit leaders and managers interrogate how they personally benefit from current systems of inequities as a precondition to making the cultural change necessary to bring about racial justice.

But it is not only nonprofit organizations and their leaders that need to do this important inner work to unlearn white supremacy and racial capitalistic conditioning. RE practitioners also recognize that they need to be the change they want to manifest in their client partners. They have to, as one RE practitioner says, “walk the talk,” too. Heidi Lopez at REACH cohort member Latinx Racial Equality Project (LREP) explains, “We need to make sure that we’re doing the work internally. We were absolutely out of alignment in almost every aspect of the organization: who led, who was represented or not, how people were treating each other, how

people were honest or not about the identities that we held, and the ways we were enacting white supremacy with, among, and between each other, including anti-Blackness and Native erasure that we talk about in our workshops.” This self-examination makes the difference between “bringing community along from a more authentic place and causing harm.” According to Lopez, the inner work is integral to the work LREP does with its client partners. “Doing our own work internally is part of how we assess other organizations because you can only take people so far as you’ve gone. If I haven’t done my own reflection, my own analysis, then I don’t know what questions I may need to ask, or I may be too scared to ask.” Or, as Mala Nagarajan at Vega Mala Consulting asks, “If we cannot demonstrate the change we seek to make, who are we to ask the rest of the world to change?”

The REACH Fund offers RE practitioners in its cohort, like LREP, the time, resources, and the spaciousness necessary to leverage their learning from working with client partners in order to hone their own approaches and practices in these tumultuous times and align their organizational culture and practices more authentically.

As Liz Derias at CompassPoint demonstrates in the case study below, “Racial justice is hard work. Sometimes we think about racial justice work as the fight on the street. What’s the policy fight, what’s the advocacy fight? How are we shifting the conditions for people? All of that is part and parcel of racial justice work. And I also think that organizational transformation is part of racial justice work, and that’s not always a story that gets highlighted. So for us at CompassPoint, we really have been trying to practice racial justice from the inside out. It’s forced us to take a look at how we develop systems that actually embed our values.”

## REACH COHORT MEMBER: COMPASSPOINT



Credit: CompassPoint

CompassPoint, a REACH cohort partner, is committed to helping social justice leaders, nonprofit organizations, and movements realize their full power through leadership development, coaching, peer networks, consulting, and research and publication. According to Project Director Steve Lew, in the mid-2000s, CompassPoint was offering cultural competence training and consulting for the nonprofit sector. Lew says, “The turning point was when one of our funders wanted us to do work in supporting cultural competency within those organizations, but said, why don’t you use some of the resources for your own cultural competency work within CompassPoint? And that led to a very focused effort to start assessing ourselves, to really think about our own gaps and fissures—whether it was equity around race, gender, or class.” This turning point resulted, in the following decades, a more explicit racial justice commitment and approach to policies, practices, staff and board composition, and finally external programmatic work.

“Black people contributed to that [at CompassPoint and elsewhere],” says Liz Derias, Co-Executive Director, in reference to the racial justice lens. As a leader with a long history in organizing in Black movement spaces, she explains, “All of us in some ways have been really catalyzed by the murders of Black people across the United States, as media attention was starting to be placed all the way back in 2012, with Trayvon Martin. And then we started to see Tamir Rice and Mike Brown garner media

attention. And we see that catalyst happen with funders and donors, at least over the last three years, with the murder of George Floyd and the racial reckoning that brought people out into the streets in the summer of 2020. But there had been decades and decades of community work and organizing work that’s snowballed to the media acknowledgment to really hone in on Black Lives Matter as a movement. I think that really catalyzed a lot of organizations and a lot of people to shift their priorities. People were coming in already to organizations with a level of politics that they were not able to fully express. Many organizations started to shift not just their commitment to racial justice, but in particular their commitment to Black leadership.”

That shift at CompassPoint was not comfortable or straightforward, and it required a lot of what Communications Director Maro Guevara describes as “generative tension” that leads to a shared analysis and language about race. For instance, after much discussion with staff, CompassPoint moved away from the decades-old framework of “cultural competence” to one of racial justice, as Derias says, specifically “with a pro-Black center.”

She explains, “In the last two years, we’ve been digging into what it means to a pro-Black organization, not just one who’s fighting anti-Blackness. We don’t use terms like anti-Blackness or espouse DEI, even though I know that’s the popular framework that people have stepped into. We’re not interested in diversity, equity, and inclusion that still centers white supremacy, patriarchy, and ableism. We’re interested in building power with Black people at the center. We focus on the agency of Black people to build power, and then the agency that all of us have as multiracial folks to build power for Black communities.”

These shifts had real implications on the working conditions at CompassPoint. For example, Guevara cites experiments in shared leadership (“Black leadership in particular”), in normalizing conversations that are explicitly rooted in racial equity, and in promotion and compensation that is centered in racial justice,





which resulted in “different kinds of untapped creativity and programming flourishing”—especially, Derias adds, prioritizing Black leaders and programming like the [BLACK Equity Intensive](#) that was launched in 2021, with support from the REACH Fund.

In its first year, CompassPoint received 150 applications to the BLACK Equity Intensive, a cohort-based program for Black leaders to focus on pro-Blackness (“centering the brilliance, gifts, ideas, and wisdom of Black leaders”). In response, CompassPoint expanded their initial capacity of 18 leaders to 27. The demand was instructive for the organization. Derias says, “We were able to gather a lot of information from the 150 [applicants] about what they saw as their needs in the field, for their individual leadership. We’re still carrying that information with us. As part of our work now, we launched a community listening project to hear from Black leaders across the country in order to forge a path forward.” One insight Derias learned from this experience so far was the need to support Black leadership at a time when they were moving into executive and leadership positions, with the often unrealistic expectations to quickly transform organizations by undoing the long history of being “white-led and white-bred.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Elissa Sloan Perry at Change Elemental (another REACH cohort member), also describes this “Glass Cliffs” phenomenon and refers to the [research report](#) from the Building Movement Project on this topic.

## 02 A.2 DECOLONIZING THE NONPROFIT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

The philanthropic-nonprofit model is often an anathema for many well-intentioned leaders in their racial equity journey. Many nonprofits mimic the management and governance structure of the corporate sector, with a small group of “C-suite” leaders holding decision-making powers, which doesn’t promote equity and inclusion of everyone, including the communities that they serve. In this environment,



courageous conversations about racism in the organizations are often suppressed due to fear of retaliation or “toxic politeness,” as described by Anouska Bhattacharyya at YWCA Boston.

In public, many nonprofit leaders are wary about taking political stances that they might deem too partisan or controversial, lest they



jeopardize the organization’s nonprofit status or alienate supporters. Referencing John A. Powell’s targeted universalism, Cynthia Silva Parker at Interaction Institute for Social Change says, “If you can really target very specifically the needs

of the folks furthest away from power and opportunity, the odds are you’re going to build a society that’s better for everyone.” But too often, leaders do not want to take that “design for the margins” approach and risk being accused of advancing partisan ideas or “reverse racism.” “There’s no such thing as reverse racism,” she adds. “And leaders need to deprioritize their own comfort and be willing to speak and act publicly. We put too many limits on ourselves because we think the prohibition against lobbying and partisan work prohibits a lot more than it actually does. There’s a lot more we could do, even as [501](c)3s, if we clearly understood the rules.”

Funding models for nonprofits—mostly through foundation grants or government contracts—make matters worse. These funding sources do not leave much room for organizations to do the inner work. The “compliance” focus on deliverables, or even outcomes, misses the boat on deep transformation. At best, funded activities are bandages to social ills without the possibility of eliminating the root causes. Heidi Lopez at LREP goes even further to suggest the nonprofit industrial complex was “created to disrupt the movement.” Funding processes do not encourage equity and collaboration, but silos and competition instead.

Lopez says, “I feel that getting lost in that legalese, the paperwork...that and grant writing, sinks an organization’s creativity and risk-taking. This is still the case in 2023,

**“ If you can really target very specifically the needs of the folks furthest away from power and opportunity, the odds are you’re going to build a society that’s better for everyone. But too often, leaders do not want to take that “design for the margins” approach.**

**Cynthia Silvia Parker**  
Interaction Institute of Social Change

but if you don't establish yourself under this code of the IRS [nonprofit 501(c)3 status], you don't get the money."

As Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz at RoadMap Consulting observes, even when organizational leaders are open to taking more risks, many do not find a lot of support from the inside. She



says, "We see this all the time: EDs who have not had the experience of actually developing workplace culture and policies and compensation approaches that are radical and liberatory. And there's not a massive amount of people in the HR [human resources] field that can help EDs grapple with this." Or, as Weiner-Mahfuz notes, they run into conflicts with board members who may be more averse to risk-taking, partly because these board leaders do not often come from the most impacted communities or because they hold fiduciary responsibilities and liabilities.

The hypocrisy of the nonprofit industrial complex compromises the effectiveness of any organization with a social change mission. RE practitioners, like those in the REACH cohort, support equity-minded leaders to be brave, creative, and ambitious in going beyond the

limitations of, or in the words of J. Miakoda Taylor at Fierce Allies, "decolonizing" the philanthropic-nonprofit industrial complex. Taylor says, "We need to be moving towards a cooperative economy for the field itself."

The area of employee compensation is one way some RE practitioners are decolonizing the nonprofit industrial complex. Mala Nagarajan at Vega Mala Consulting says she no longer supports organizations interested only in staying competitive by replicating mainstream labor market dynamics "because those practices simply continue to widen the wealth gap. We're just taking the inequities in the market and putting them right into our systems." With her collaborator Richael Faithful, Nagarajan, as demonstrated in the case study below, is helping nonprofit organizations find a more equitable and liberatory way. Challenging long-held practices in human resources, Nagarajan and Faithful are supporting organizations who are ready to "lean into risk and hug the edge of the [legal] border," recognizing these client partners are "pathmakers" charting a new norm for the field.

Ultimately, many RE practitioners believe we have to transcend the limits of the philanthropic-nonprofit model and imagine other possibilities for organizing movements. As Elissa Sloan Perry at Change Elemental says, "Individual 501(c)3's can't make up for all of the failures of the state. We can't provide childcare for everyone, full health insurance for your entire family at a hundred percent coverage, and all the things that would support us living fully, while we contribute meaningfully to the liberating practices of the world. Maybe there are some ways we can come together and do that as bands of organizations." Sloan Perry and other RE practitioners are focusing on movement outcomes not just at the organizational level, but also at the individual and ecosystem levels. In fact, as a later section demonstrates, many practitioners in the REACH Fund organize or support networks and cohorts of movement leaders or organizations as another liberatory practice.



## REACH COHORT MEMBERS: **VEGA MALA CONSULTING & RICHAEAL FAITHFUL**

## CLIENT PARTNERS: **DC GREENS & GRASSROOTS GLOBAL JUSTICE ALLIANCE (GGJ)**



Credit: Vega Mala Consulting

DC Greens works towards health equity in our nation's capital through multiple channels, the most renowned of which is the Produce RX program “in which doctors can prescribe fruits and vegetables to patients on Medicaid,” says Fatimah Ahmad, its Operations Director. The organization also works on several policy initiatives, including improving healthy food access in places like correctional facilities and public schools, and operates a one-acre green and wellness space with a farm that provides fruits and vegetables to local communities in Southeast Washington, D.C. The organization was founded in 2009 when one of its two white founders realized that there wasn't a farmer's market in her neighborhood, but that original strategy expanded when the organization recognized that their work was not colorblind and “race plays a huge part in people's access to food.”

Ahmad continues, “In 2018, we realized that we could not do the work of improving health outcomes without understanding more deeply what the impact of systemic racism and oppression had on all of us.” In 2022, DC Greens hired its first Black woman executive director. Ahmad says that this transition was preceded by a lot of honest conversations about race. (Since the interview for this case study, Ahmad has been appointed the Interim Executive Director at the organization.)

“The organization early on would say we're a food justice organization,” explains Ahmad. “I don't think there was a clear understanding of what that meant to people. A lot of the first year [2018] with our facilitators was about having discussions about who we are, and what it means when we say this thing out into the world. Where is it we think we can have the most impact? Who do we want to move into being? That led us to this refinement of us being a health equity organization. We refined our values so that they are more closely aligned with our mission and that they were actually things that are very attainable. We developed an organizational philosophy that we didn't have before. For instance, we value collaboration over competition. We don't gatekeep information. If we come into a space with a similar organization, the first thing we need to be asking ourselves is, is there a way we can collaborate with them?”

She continues, “We decided from there that we needed some external support to provide guidance on basically analyzing what those pieces actually looked like as an organization.”

The organization first brought on Richael Faithful to facilitate a staff retreat, and afterward, the BIPOC staff caucus continued the conversation with her. Faithful then invited another consultant to facilitate a separate caucus for white staff. Soon after, DC Greens added a third consultant to support organizational design work and individual coaching. One conversation led to other pieces of the puzzle. Ahmad says, “We

realized there was an element that was missing, and that was a social justice approach to human resources that could help us operationalize the wonderful learnings we were having from our caucus work and individual coaching.” For this, Faithful introduced DC Greens to their longtime collaborator, Mala Nagarajan at Vega Mala Consulting, to work with the Operations working group that Ahmad was a part of. Faithful and Nagarajan’s collaborative practice on equitable compensation has only deepened, with support from the REACH Fund, since their partnership with DC Greens.

Ahmad says, “We ended up engaging the four consultants all at the same time, to support us in hitting what we were hoping to be a stabilizing, transformative alignment project for our organization.” On reflecting on the intricate process, Ahmad breathes out a “Wow,” before she continues. “It was complex, and it was not neat. Transformation oftentimes is not a linear process. It doesn’t have a clean beginning, middle, and end. The number one thing is abandoning perfection, or abandoning this idea of arriving somewhere. We had to believe we were engaging in something where, on the other side of it, we were going to be in a place that was more aligned with our values and that supported us in achieving our mission.”

There were times, Ahmad acknowledges, “when things were really, really hard. Sometimes it looked like we might be doing more damage than we were doing good. Our organization has had a comfort with change that I think is uncommon. Because of the way our founders navigated the organization, we had a tolerance and a muscle for flexibility.” That “and the commitment to do what we said we were going to do is what made us push forward to the other side of hard,” says Ahmad. To her, this inner work to align the values of those working at DC Greens, set them up effectively for their subsequent work in decolonizing traditional HR practices, including staff compensation.

For Nagarajan, equitable compensation structures have broader movement implications. She says, “We’re really talking about how we

bring interpersonal and community small ‘r’ reparations<sup>4</sup> into compensation and in a way that advances our movements. We show people a potential way, like [Chris Moore-Backman](#) wrote, to ‘give back in proportion to their privilege.’ We are trying to reflect and embody ‘small is a reflection of the large,’ as adrienne maree brown wrote in *Emergent Strategy*.”

Nagarajan has been experimenting with several equitable approaches to compensation that do not replicate market approaches. According to her, these approaches: (1) widen the wealth gap, and (2) reward people who are doing similar work differently, through gendered and racialized compensation factors and benefit practices.

Common compensation factors like seniority, geography, years of relevant experience, and education level are more likely to disadvantage workers who have not had structural support or privileges. Common-place percentage-based benefits, like a percentage-based cost of living adjustment or a percentage-based retirement match, favor higher-income workers in building a disproportionate amount of wealth over time. Lower-income workers are disadvantaged by these approaches and hold the bulk of the burden inequitably.

For example, Nagarajan believes that everyone in the organization should receive the same base pay, with additional compensation to specific “areas of responsibilities” (AOR). The equitable approach also limits the ability (on both sides) to negotiate a salary, a practice that feels counter-intuitive to a capitalistic culture where employer and employee have opposing objectives.

Nagarajan often tells her clients, “Look, we’re doing something on the edge of innovation. It is not something that we have a yellow brick road

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<sup>4</sup> Nagarajan added, “The state ultimately holds the responsibility for capital “R” in [Reparations](#) to the Black/African-American descendants of enslaved persons and [Indigenous communities](#) whose lands were stolen and sovereignty tread upon.”

for, but if we don't try something different, we will continue to advance racist policies." Many, including DC Greens, are willing to experiment with Nagarajan. And the four-part seminar series that she has instituted on equitable compensation is always at capacity. The demand illustrates for her that people are so dissatisfied with the status quo that is the market approach to compensation, that they are willing to explore something new, even if it is uncomfortable.

Ahmad says that unlearning that status quo takes "multiple levels of touchpoints to layer the information." She explains, "We are developing something where the goal is not for you to try to get the most money for your salary. The goal is for you to get the amount that corresponds to the responsibility you're holding, no more or no less. And so, the invisible part of people having feelings around pay, that they need to advocate and fight for something—this system doesn't work that way. The system is, we are looking at this all together. And so you don't have to advocate and fight for anything." For new staff, this is reinforced throughout the hiring process from the job announcement to the onboarding. The responsibility cannot fall only on Ahmad as the Operations Director. She says, "It takes a group of people to hold this and to continue to hold this, And it gets easier over time."

For existing staff, it took many conversations. In this work, Nagarajan always starts with political education around the root causes behind the widening wealth gap in the U.S. Nagarajan recognizes that the equitable compensation change process needs to speak beyond the cognitive side because "there's money trauma that needs to be addressed."

For Faithful, equitable compensation strikes at the crux of their racial equity approach, which is about alignment of racial justice values, incorporation of power analysis, and being trauma-informed and healing-centered. They say, "We really get to the intersections of people's trauma around money and work, understanding the power relationships about the choices and the limitations people have around how they're valued, how that value translates into material

compensation, and how that relates to their labor. And for people who want to be intentional about what that means, not only individually, but at a collective level." They add, "Eighty percent of our work is actually just trying to do that deep listening and feeling of what is happening."

To do this, Faithful starts with different circles of dialogues to understand "how people feel inside the system," particularly their sense of value and their relationship with power in the organization. "We start with what people feel is fair, and then we go to the level of organization, the choices the organization made around compensation. We get people's feedback about their experiences, feelings, and thoughts within existing systems," says Faithful. "Typically by then, there is an opportunity to draw out racialized components of the systems. Gender and disability come up a lot, too. It allows us to have a more intersectional discussion." Faithful aims for these listening sessions to "leverage the voices of people who especially feel like there is a lack of transparency."

In collaborating with Faithful, Mark Liu at Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (GGJ) observes that Faithful possesses "a level of being present, validating, hearing what people were saying, being able to listen and capture the main lessons. There were also some activities at the very beginning, since we're talking about pay equity, about people's relationship to money. And people were able to share about that. And so I think they [Faithful] just set the stage to empower folks around conversations about money, but also acknowledging the baggage that we may be bringing, normalizing that and taking away some of the shame that people may carry."

Based on their work with organizations like DC Greens and GGJ, Faithful is standardizing a discussion guide, part of the compensation equity toolkit that they and Nagarajan are developing with support from the REACH Fund.

The work with DC Greens that started in 2018 got Nagarajan and Faithful thinking about a more reparative approach to pay equity, and they also

understood that they needed to live this radical value themselves before demanding it for their clients. So Nagarajan and Faithful, along with the other two consultants at DC Greens, practiced what they preached by devising an arrangement that considered their various needs. They considered factors like historical discrimination, net worth, the number of people their income supported, emotional labor, monthly expenses, and distributed and anticipated inheritance, to arrive at variable rates for each of the four consultants.<sup>5</sup> The final arrangement, Nagarajan says, made a huge difference in alleviating one consultant's financial stress, while allowing other consultants to live their values. This experiment was a natural outgrowth of Nagarajan's formulation of the Reparative Distributive Factor (RDF)<sup>6</sup>, the roots of which began years before when Nagarajan pondered how business finance concepts like present and future value could be repurposed, for example, to estimate how long affirmative action would need to be in place to restore equity and guarantee equal opportunity by identifying the present value of historical discrimination and land theft.

Often, in workshop or conference presentations, Faithful and Nagarajan ask participants to anonymously share their salary, their household income, and their personal wealth. And if the group is large enough, they will also ask about their racial identity, so they can do a quick cross-tabulation by race. Nagarajan says,

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5 Mala Nagarajan and Richael Faithful, "Brave Questions: Recalculating Pay Equity," *Network Weaver*, July 8, 2020. <https://networkweaver.com/brave-questions-recalculating-pay-equity/>

6 Richael Faith and Mala Nagarajan, "Threshold for Change: From Traditional to Reparative," under review, provided by Nagarajan. When Nagarajan refers to reparations or reparative approaches, she is referring to interpersonal or community reparations. She cites Aaron Goggins and kuwa jasiri indomela for these concepts. She is not referring to "the big-R Reparations, the kind owned by the government for its historic atrocities." See: <https://borealisphilanthropy.org/investing-in-community-why-radical-human-resources-is-critical-for-movement-organizations/>

"It's always jaw-dropping for folks to see who they are in the room with and where they are in the [wealth] curve. I think once people see how people's material conditions growing up have affected where they are in their current station, things really shift. People have an epiphany. One person when we did this said, 'I was in the lowest group and I thought our household making 60K was like a huge step up. And all these folks are making 120K.' He was describing this disconnect: we go into a workplace and we think we're all equal."

Society's inhibition to discuss personal wealth can make it uncomfortable for organizations and individuals to be transparent about people's salaries. (Some people even think disclosing salaries is illegal; it is not). This obfuscation also hides disparities. In contrast, the transparency about money can be liberating. From working with her clients, Nagarajan observes that, as staff collectively decide on the value of different AOR, invisible labor begins to surface, and many people feel seen in the organization. In another instance, the client organization's leadership was so upset to find out from these conversations that some staff "were struggling month to month to make ends meet that the organization increased the bottom range by \$10,000," even before their team implemented a new compensation structure.

That is not to say the alternative approach did not meet any resistance. Many people have invested a lot of their resources in academic degrees and professional credentials, factors that drive traditional compensation approaches. Faithful recalls an older Black man in a client organization who "struggled with the reality of making a lot of life decisions around certain degrees," despite systemic barriers that he had faced to achieve them. Faithful says, "He felt he had paid his dues. He was playing by the rules. He was having some difficulty with the idea that the rules are changing, and resentment that it didn't give him the advantage he was supposed to have." Part of the reconciliation, they say, is a "reframe" or "breakdown of the market binary": a reparative consideration is additive (win-win), or lifting up more people,





without bringing others down (zero-sum).

When Nagarajan and Faithful applied this approach to their work with GGJ, according to Mark Liu, Finance and HR Manager, people “appreciated being part of the process to imagine and actually create something new and different.” Under Faithful’s skillful facilitation, the staff agreed to prioritize people’s needs as part of GGJ’s total compensation program. From these conversations, Liu became clearer about staff wanting the organization “to take care of staff with more needs, not necessarily those who the market says we should pay more.” He started to think more creatively about supporting staff who are single parents, for example.

Faithful acknowledges with limited resources and legal constraints, an organization—and individuals within it—need to make some trade-offs for this redistribution. Faithful finds it encouraging that some people in privileged positions have volunteered for pay reductions, contradicting a conventional narrative of economic and professional self-interest. When asked what compelled these people to make these decisions, both Nagarajan and Faithful believe that their pay reduction gives their commitment to racial and economic justice a sense of integrity in an “embodied” way. Faithful says, “The thing that I see is common among people who are prepared to redistribute in that way is first they usually have a pretty significant amount of political education. So they have really interrogated that on a systemic level and then brought that down to the personal level, in the ways they have benefited from historical and current racism. I think the other thing that these people have in common is often that there’s also been enough personal

development where they can value themselves in other ways, like feeling like they are more in line with their community or spiritual values.”

The traditional human resources approach values equal pay for equal work (in theory), which is antithetical to the reparative approach that considers historical discrimination and current needs. As a former civil rights lawyer, Faithful appreciates the traditional principle of protecting marginalized people who are often discriminated against in the workplace. A reparative approach could be (falsely) faulted for “reverse racism”; in fact, any “remedial” policy that aims to correct the continuing effects of the history of racism in the U.S. has become suspect in the political climate after the Supreme Court ruled against affirmative action in college admissions in June 2023. But Nagarajan and Faithful believe there can be “creative workarounds.”

One of those solutions is to reframe knowledge production. In addition to academic and professional credentials, lived experience, especially with the issues and communities addressed by a nonprofit organization, should be equally valued and invested. At GGJ, Liu thinks that sometimes people’s assets are reflected in their lived experience in communities of high needs. He explains, “Did you grow up in a place without secure food access? Did you have to translate for your family? Do you know someone in prison? There are all kinds of issues that people face that help people in their work. We’ve weighted that piece heavily in our system.”

“It’s about experience more than identities,” says Faithful. “It gets trickier when you get into identities.”

Another “workaround” is expanding compensation to consider more than just salaries. For instance, at GGJ, Liu is exploring how to use wellness funding to support single parents, including support for dependent care or fuller health insurance coverage for children. At the end of the day, Faithful believes that even when an organization cannot pay someone as much as they think they deserve, there are different



ways for that organization to acknowledge that person's worth and contributions.

Faithful also believes the work that they and Nagarajan are doing in changing organizational culture (and not just instituting policies) is key to this transformation. They explain, "There are a whole bunch of laws that [human resources] have to comply with. Anything prescriptive that's this radical will run into legal interference. But culturally, if we're doing lots of facilitation and people have a change of heart, or if they are given a broad set of choices of what they want to do and we get more people to select the choices that are more radical, then that's the genuine workaround."

Conversations about equitable compensation often shed light on unspoken inequities in the organization beyond salary structure. Both Ahmad at DC Greens and Liu at GGJ observe that the work around equitable compensation was part of a larger "courageous conversation" both organizations were engaging in to uplift and heal from past hurt. The byproduct is more than just a pay structure that is aligned with their organizational values. Both Ahmad and Liu also think it contributed to a more open and democratic culture in their respective organization, as well as more trust, cohesion, clarity, and sense of belonging among staff.

According to Ahmad, an early insight from working on the compensation structure was that DC Green's organizational chart did not have enough "clarity about roles, responsibilities, and reporting structure." Ahmad says, "Through that lack of clarity, people with various identities across the organization did not have the same access to power. We had two white founders. So oftentimes some of the white staff felt more comfortable accessing the founders advocating for themselves and potentially getting opportunities to do things that some of the BIPOC staff did not have the same comfort level around doing."

As illustrated in a later section about "inclusive governance," working on the organizational chart opened up a new conversation about decision-

making in the organization. This intricacy explains why it takes multiple RE practitioners, with different expertise and skill sets, for deep transformations. "What started out as an HR initiative now looks like a change management initiative," summarizes Ahmad. These parallel conversations and processes illustrate how intricately linked organizational structure and practices are if leaders are serious about weaving equity throughout their organization.

Liu reflects, "What's been really key for GGJ is to be able to get better and better at conflict. We live in a racist society. We're not perfect. There's going to be stuff that happens. It was more about how we're going to restore, repair, and be accountable, without throwing anyone away or banishing or punishing people. And how do we help everyone grow and be better together? Particularly in my HR role, how do I keep applying these principles to policies and practices? I feel like it's paying off and we have to keep working on it."

Ultimately, to Nagarajan and Faithful, racial equity in organizational development is culture work. In their webinar series around equitable compensation, they are training other consultants and internal organizational change agents in this work. Collectively, they hope, enough organizations will transform and reach a tipping point in the nonprofit sector. The work with individual organizations is only the beginning. Citing Sociologist Damon Centola, Nagarajan and Faithful write, "When 25% of us who have been privileged voluntarily redistribute because it's the right thing to do, the scale of justice and social pressure will turn people to do the right thing (not because of the law)." Beyond the work with individual organizations, their vision as RE practitioners is that "social justice organizations be the source of a private reparations movement to make workplaces fairer and more effectively make market corrections."<sup>7</sup>

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7 Mala Nagarajan and Richael Faithful, "Brave Questions: Recalculating Pay Equity," *Network Weaver*, July 8, 2020. <https://networkweaver.com/brave-questions-recalculating-pay-equity/>

## 02 B. LIBERATORY PRACTICES - BUILDING

The two “unlearning” case studies demonstrate Audre Lorde’s maxim: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” The RE practitioners over the years have built new tools for racial justice, forged out of the struggles of those activists that came before them as well as from their imagination and creativity in meeting new political moments. The blend of progressive traditional wisdom and daring innovations is necessary for a reality that is constantly emerging. After all, when our oppositions are entrenched and better resourced, their strategies will evolve in response to our resistance, especially when we are gaining ground. In this section, RE practitioners




and their nonprofit partners share several “building” liberatory practices, tools that are new or reimagined to sustain, nourish, and connect the people on the frontlines fighting against social injustices. These practices include political education; holistic healing, repair, and rehumanizing; inclusive governance; and field building and networked ecologies.

## 02 B.1 POLITICAL EDUCATION

In the equitable compensation case study, RE practitioners Mala Nagarajan and Richael Faithful begin their work with any client partner with a political re-education about the wealth gap in the U.S. and its root causes. Faithful says capitalism’s conditioning on us is so deep that we often replicate it uncritically. They say, “Even in racial justice movement, we cling to narratives, like meritocracy, that make it challenging to talk about pay equity.” By highlighting how the reward system in most nonprofits “mimics the inequities in our market system,” this political re-education, says Nagarajan, destabilizes its inevitability. She says, “The way I talk about my work is that we’re reverse engineering compensation so we can more easily see the privileges it builds on and be more intentional about how we rebuild a system that is less harmful, less extractive, more values-aligned, and more reparative.”

Similarly, many organizations begin their racial equity journey by reclaiming the erased history and ancestral practices of BIPOC communities in order to create a shared understanding of the persistence of systemic racism in communities today. They often engage staff in political study, using resources like the 1619 Project, *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, and *Healing Justice Lineages* by Cara Page and Erica Woodland.

In a collaborative essay, Aja Couchois Duncan and Elissa Sloan Perry at Change Elemental explain why getting on the same page on political analysis is important. They write, “Collective sense-making requires some shared understanding of the current and historical structures, strategies, and belief systems that benefit some people at the expense of others. This is a juncture in the journey where indepth, whole-system conversations are crucial to restore the very real stories of settler colonialism, enslavement, genocide, wage theft, and extractive capitalism that have largely been disappeared from and or greatly distorted in our education systems. Building on these understandings, teams can also develop



**“ Collective sense-making requires some shared understanding of the current and historical structures, strategies, and belief systems that benefit some people at the expense of others... Building on these understandings, teams can also develop a shared understanding of how the continuing impacts of these legacies and other ongoing systems of oppression and inequity interact to perpetuate the manifestations of inequity in our lives and organizations.**

**Aja Couchois-Duncan and Elissa Sloan Perry**  
Change Elemental

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a shared understanding of how the continuing impacts of these legacies and other ongoing systems of oppression and inequity interact to perpetuate the manifestations of inequity in our lives and organizations. This discordant recognition is fundamental to the path...What matters is that teams are moving towards a shared understanding that interrupting current, intersectional racial inequities isn't possible without having a depth of knowledge about historical inequities and the practices and systems that support their perpetuation.”<sup>8</sup>

Cynthia Silva Parker at Interaction Institute for Social Change shares a story of transformation of a client organization that went through this politicization process: “Their team members said, ‘We would never have come to the conclusion that we have to get in the game

of actually dealing with structural barriers if it hadn't been for this process. There are 4 million young people who are not employed. They're our target audience. We obviously aren't going to serve 4 million people and we need to make sure that we're doing everything we can to make sure there aren't another 4 million people coming right behind them in the same situation.’ That was a big insight for an organization that was already at the top of its game, feeling very proud, and rightfully so, about the work they were doing, and then realizing, ‘Oh, there's a whole other thing now we don't know that much about. We have to find some new partners.’ They're not running pickets or doing organizing work, but they've gotten in the movement in a bigger way than they would've otherwise.”

Another aspect of political education is about understanding, strategizing, countering, and blocking the conservative and authoritarian oppositions. Opposition analysis, or the understanding of forces that challenge progressive movement leaders and ecosystems is a crucial but often neglected piece of capacity

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<sup>8</sup> Sloan Perry, Elissa, and Aja Couchios Duncan. “People Stitching Earth | Oppression, Healing, Liberation, and Navigating the Terrain in Between” (blog). <https://changeelemental.org/resources/people-stitching-earth/>.



**“ Political education, then, is the foundation that opens up conversations about what else is possible.**

building. As a result, leaders and movements are less prepared for the challenges from these opposition forces. A deeper understanding, on the other hand, can influence strategic planning, resource allocation, risk management, and the overall direction of the organization and movement. In shedding light on the broader political landscape in which they operate, this type of political education can help organizations anticipate challenges, develop counter-strategies, and build broader-based coalitions.

Political education, then, is the foundation that opens up conversations about what else is possible. The following case study highlights the work of another REACH cohort member leveraging local Indigenous history in this liberatory approach.





## REACH COHORT MEMBER: **HUMBOLDT AREA FOUNDATION**

### CLIENT PARTNER: **STEPPING STONE CONSULTING**



**Credit:** Barry Evans

**Caption:** This National Historic Landmark plaque on Woodley Island, with Tuluwat Island (formerly Indian Island) in the background, merely refers to “Indian/Gunther Island, Site 67.” No mention is made of the 1860 massacre.



In 2015, after a storied history of working in movement building (as early as when he was 12 years old, attending his first civil rights demonstration in the 1960s), Ron White took a job at the Humboldt Area Foundation (HAF) with a charge to develop community leadership in the rural Humboldt County and North Coast in California. White was no stranger to small towns. He went to high school in a rural town in northern Wisconsin, where he was one of two Black students. White remembers that the town “actually still had the sundown law” when he lived there.

Humboldt County, his new home, White describes, “has a reputation of liberal libertarianism. People are ecologically conscious.” But as a colleague quips, white

residents’ response to racial tension often runs the line of “I recycle. How can I possibly be a racist?” White people still make up about 70% of the population and lead public agencies and local institutions, including HAF. On the other hand, like many parts of the U.S., Humboldt has had and continues to have a significant Indigenous presence. The populations of people of color are also growing, especially the Latinx community. White also remarks that he’s seen an uptick in violence against Asian and LGBTQ people.

Melissa Meiris, Co-Director of Stepping Stone Consulting, a close collaborator with HAF in their racial equity work, says, “Humboldt County and the North Coast in general has historically been behind the curve relative to the rest of California in racial equity issues. There were small clusters of people who were interested in doing the work, but it was slow to pick up. A larger portion of the County was pretty green at the idea at the time. Ron [White] and the Humboldt Area Foundation were really at the cutting edge of that. They were starting to convene groups of people to build capacity for racial justice in the region.”

To further racial equity work in Humboldt, HAF began to host a series of public education forums on racial equity, the first of which was kicked off by noted law professor John A. Powell. The series attracted more people than most expected in a rural environment like Humboldt, and the attendance increased during the series, including some heavy hitters from local public agencies. These institutions were key to culture change in this area because, as White says, they serve the majority of the population in the County, including some of the most marginalized communities.

HAF “leaned heavily into local history” in this political education. White says, “People just don’t realize how government has disadvantaged people of color. White people just think, ‘We made better choices.’ I do think history is really important. If folks don’t understand the origins of the conflict, they have their own story about it. Most of those families who were living on the land were profiting from it, even Humboldt Area Foundation. Folks just don’t even bother

to understand how that happened. Maybe a decade or so, someone would mention the massacre that happened in Tuluwat Island,<sup>9</sup> but it didn't go very deep and was mainly told from the point of view of 'it's a horrible history but what can you do now.' Same way with the expulsion of the Chinese up here.<sup>10</sup>"

These historical incidents were not just acts of racist individuals but were sanctioned by state, media, and business interests. The vestiges of this structural violence persist today unexamined.



**Credit:** Eddy Alexander/City of Eureka

**Caption:** The Wiyot tribe celebrates the land return in a ceremony on October 21, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> In 1860, white settlers, mostly gold miners, murdered between 80 to 250 Wiyot people at Tuluwat Island in Humboldt Bay. The massacre was followed by more attacks on Wiyot villages in subsequent weeks. The day before the massacre, the local paper issued an editorial that read like a call to violence: "The settlers must be protected and the Indians and not the white must yield ground...keep this company in the field until the redskins are driven from our country." Barry Evans, "The Tuluwat Island Massacre in Its Time," *North Coast Journal*, October 6, 2022. Accessed at: <https://www.northcoastjournal.com/humboldt/the-tuluwat-island-massacre-in-its-time/Content?oid=24834282>

<sup>10</sup> In 1885, three years after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, nearly all of the Chinese residents were expelled from Eureka, a city in Humboldt County that these immigrants had helped build. The white mob set up gallows and hung effigies near Chinatown with signs that threatened to hang any Chinese immigrants who stayed. Hector Alejandro Arzate, "Chinese Immigrants Were Forced Out of Eureka in 1885 - Here's How Locals Are Making That History Known," KQED, October 15, 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.kqed.org/news/11891987/chinese-immigrants-were-forced-out-of-eureka-in-1885-heres-how-locals-are-making-that-history-known>

"Getting to that [racial equity] conversation has to begin with historical context, and it has to be told by people who it actually happened to," says White. "And as people began to claim those stories and say those stories out loud, at least we understand that race is an issue. We also understand that it's structural. We built on that as a basis."

For this, White and HAF look toward Indigenous worldviews on restoration and renewal. He explains, "I have nothing but admiration for the tribes up here. They have a method of dealing with conflicts and woundedness. Most of the tribes engage in world renewal ceremonies. In order to participate in those ceremonies, people have to enter into them with a balanced slate... You have to make it right before you can enter them. How can you heal the world if you're actually moving in broken relationships yourself?"

"So their attitude towards the past was, everything that happened was horrible. It was tragic and white people did this to us, first for gold, and then timber and land. They also recognize that we're all in the same basket. Our health affects your health. Your health affects ours. Our joint health affects the rivers. The river's health affects the land's health. We're all in one basket."

"In a Humboldt State documentary on local Native history, the Wiyot tribal chairman says, 'They wanted our gold, they wanted our fish, they wanted our timber. If they had asked us, we probably would've shared it with them, but all they did was take and kill because they just assumed that we were just like they were.'"

"When the Natives here talk about 'land back,' they don't talk about it in terms of 'give us the land back and get out'. Rather, we're all stewards of this place. We need to have the ability to actually keep this place healthy. That's all of our job. They want a say over how things are developed, how the rivers are taken care of, what plants should grow here, and which areas are sacred and should be left alone. Some people did sign over their property to the Wiyot tribe on their own. Others,





**Credit:** Justin Sullivan/  
Getty Images

**Caption:** Thousands of protesters and members of Native nations marched in Washington, D.C. to oppose the construction of the proposed 1,172 mile Dakota Access Pipeline that runs within a half-mile of the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota on March 10, 2017.



like Humboldt Area Foundation, pay an honor tax. The Wiyot tribe has never asked for it, but they accept it. It's really a matter of how you can be good guests to people who have stewarded this land since time immemorial."<sup>11</sup>

The principles of shared governance and stewardship that drive the racial equity work of HAF and its consultants have their roots in these ancestral wisdoms.

Centering Indigenous worldviews led to material changes in HAF leadership, too. White says, "Our Native Cultures Fund, which we've started with an endowment to fund Indigenous issues, has been moved to the center of our work. The Program Director of that fund is now the VP [of Strategy, Program, and Community Solutions] for the Foundation." Two Indigenous people now serve on HAF's board of directors. White acknowledges this is a substantive turnaround for the Foundation, which for many years did not fund Native projects "because they just assumed the government took care of them."

<sup>11</sup> The voluntary nature of these settlers' responses is similar to the examples from Richael Faithful about people with privilege taking a voluntary pay cut once they understand the inequity in their organization's compensation structure. It's more about changing the culture through sharpened political analysis and alignment of values, not just focusing on forcing people to do the right things through laws and policies.

The Co-Directors of Stepping Stone Consulting, Melissa Meiris, and Aristeia Saulsbury, met in 2017 at an HAF training on racial equity consulting, but they both had been engaged in this work prior to the training. While HAF employed a racial justice framework from Lakeshore Ethnic Diversity Alliance (LEDA) in Michigan, Meiris and Saulsbury used a storytelling strategy to incorporate local and personal histories to make the racial equity work more meaningful to local leaders.

In their workshops and publications on racial equity, Meiris and Saulsbury combine data about policing, education, and health with history of the North Coast, especially "how folks of color have been here and how they have been excluded from this community for generations." Meriis explains, "We both bring in our own stories and examples. For Aristeia [who traces her ancestry to the Yurok tribe], a lot of the examples have to do with what it was like to be the only Native kid in her class when she was growing up, and the different ways that she has been tokenized...The one feedback that we regularly get is, thank you so much for bringing in the local focus because it makes it so much more meaningful for folks working here."

Years of pushing racial equity work through political education have started to bear fruits. The involvement of public agencies in the forum series led to Stepping Stone consulting with the Department of Health and Human Services in 2019. Over time Stepping Stone's work begins to diffuse through different branches within the department, which has about 1,200 staff, accounting for half of County employees in Humboldt.

White says, "It's just been a huge uptick in terms of people's comfort talking about race," Even though the forums did not target local media outlets, White observes that the tone of the media coverage about race has also shifted: "Suddenly they were featuring more people of color. They were talking about not just negative stories, but positive stories. They were talking about history."



## 02 B.2 HOLISTIC HEALING, REPAIR, AND REHUMANIZING

As early as the co-design phase for this case study project, REACH cohort members reinforced the significance of tending to trauma and healing in racial equity work. The work of fighting injustice can trigger past trauma, especially for BIPOC staff. Johana Bencomo, a city councilor in Las Cruces, New Mexico who also co-leads the Women's Democracy Lab (a client partner of Change Elemental), says, "I feel like spaces in which we are serving were not created for us [women of color]. In New Mexico, it wasn't until a decade or two ago that they built a women's restroom on the Senate's side. Literally, these structures were not built for us. So we have to be bold, progressive, outspoken leaders. We're disruptors. And when you disrupt a system, it fights back." So any work that tries to undo white supremacy needs to include some healing components. One cohort member references the American Indian Movement, where healing is integral as people move towards justice.

Healing within the organizational setting has to be about modeling liberation from the inside out. People in movement organizations bring some degree of trauma into the work—we are all subject to historical and systemic racism and other oppressions in the broader society. Trauma might be our fire for social justice. That lived experience of oppression, as traumatic as it may be, is also an asset to antiracist work. In fact, movements should be led by those who have direct experience of the social justice issue at hand. But when unattended, trauma might cause us to replicate white supremacy in our organizational culture.

Mainstream American culture tends to privatize both trauma and healing. Asking difficult questions about the structural causes of trauma could be overwhelming. Or we shy away from talking about trauma publicly to avoid feeling or making others feel uncomfortable. All this avoidance might lead some to blame individuals for not transcending their trauma and reinforce its stigma and shame. Western forms of healing that focus on individuals like talk therapy might be challenging to some cultures or financially inaccessible. RE practitioners reason that, if white supremacy is the root cause of our trauma, it only makes sense that healing should also be collective.

Elissa Sloan Perry at Change Elemental says, "The work requires shifting from 'I' to 'we.' In order to make that shift, we have to do our own inner work, both individually and collectively. That's the healing part. That's the trauma-informed part. The focus is on healing, but not by way of bypassing the trauma."

Cultivating that connection and building authentic relationships are the crux of many healing practices. A key approach to racial equity organizational development is to cultivate these spaces for honest, delicate, and complex conversations. Cynthia Silva Parker at Interaction Institute for Social Change says, "If you want people to make progress on all the -isms, you've got to be able to sit together, to hear each other, to wrestle through. There has to be an openness and a willingness to be vulnerable."

Openness and vulnerability may not be possible for organizations on the first day. It is also challenging to do this work in a large group, especially when there is distrust and power imbalance. As Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz at RoadMap Consulting says, "In order to move



any client forward or deepen any movement ecosystem, you have to build trust and you have to have very honest conversations about race and power. Unfortunately, what often leads to implosion is that those things are not on the table in the cleanest and most direct way that they could be.”

J. Miakoda Taylor at Fierce Allies says, “One of the biggest challenges that I see in movement building work is the inability of people to get real about the tensions between those of us in the movement. Not enough groups are creating the relationship agreements and structure necessary for us to have fiercely honest and deeply vulnerable dialogues about the many ways we are all complicit in the harms we need to heal from, the harms we perpetuate when we project blame onto one another and utilize retributive forms of justice instead of restorative ones to address the tensions we have with one another. This further erodes our ability to leverage collective power. We understandably avoid these conversations because they are high-risk and are often highly volatile. And the cost of that avoidance is high, very, very high. Fierce Allies’ work is designed to build the practices, agreements, containers, and trust necessary for people to not only feel safe but feel compelled to

take the risks of actually getting vulnerable with each other, saying things that are uncomfortable and awkward. They feel compelled because the trust and relationship resilience that results, is like no other. Our work facilitates the personal healing necessary to do this interpersonal healing, within our collectives and movements.”

“We call this Fierce Allies, not Fuzzy Allies, for a reason,” quips Taylor. “The work is hard.”

One way RE practitioners cultivate vulnerable spaces is to design and facilitate affinity groups, usually based on racial identities or positional power, for people with similar subjectivities to articulate how they experience inequities based on past trauma or how they unconsciously reify inequities, or both. For instance, in an affinity group for non-Black people of color, members might both trace their trauma to a history of discrimination against people of color in this country and interrogate their complicity in anti-Black racism.

To hone vulnerable spaces, RE practitioners take great care to scaffold conversations and facilitate strategic discussion in different groups to build people’s muscles to move towards self-examination, empathy, shared understanding,



and specific strategies to undo white supremacy habits in an organization. Weiner-Mahfuz likens this to “any organizing project, where you are trying to mobilize everybody.”

As a RE practitioner and facilitator, Elissa Sloan Perry tries to practice that vulnerability to create a space where others can bring their full selves to the conversation. “I go to that modeling a lot,” she says, “like telling stories about when I have made a mistake or when systems of oppression have landed on me, or when I have landed them on other people. I model some of that risk-taking.” Sloan Perry also believes that organizational leaders have to be equal participants in the same way. If they do not, RE practitioners may be exposing staff to harm. She says, “We’re asking people

to take risks, whether it’s because we’re asking them to name a truth or because we’ve shared a truth and we’re asking if this actually is true. Ideally, people in positions of titular power also model that kind of vulnerability. We have to be intentional and thoughtful about when we’re asking for too much vulnerability, especially if the power situation is unwell.”

Sloan Perry uses different storytelling techniques to “lower the level of risk” for participants, “but still get at truth-telling about the subject at hand.” She explains, “Sometimes I ask people to name stories from other places in their lives. Or we might use a guided writing activity.” In a gathering of queer Black organizers after the election of Trump, Sloan Perry brought in the works of Essex Hemphill

**“ There’s a point in the process where you feel deep alignment and integrity with your values. That’s when you’re walking with integrity. You can feel it in your body. It’s a somatic experience.**

**Mala Nagarajan**  
Vega Mala Consulting



and Marlon Riggs and leveraged this queer Black lineage for participants' healing. In a later case study on networked relationships, a client talks about Sloan Perry's use of ancestral ceremonies to create brave spaces.

### **RACIAL HEALING AS AN EMBODIED PRACTICE**

Another common liberatory healing strategy is somatic practice. According to many REACH cohort members, a lot of racial equity work is about learning to listen to your body. As Mala Nagarajan at Vega Mala Consulting says, "There's a point in the process where you feel deep alignment and integrity with your values.



That's when you're walking with integrity. You can feel it in your body. It's a somatic experience."

Many of us have a hard time understanding that feeling because we have been too steeped in Western rational thinking that devalues other ways of knowing. "People always want the bibliography," says Heidi Lopez at Latinx Racial Equality Project. "Equity work that's happening in a very intellectual way does not create the deep transformation that's needed. To me, that's apolitical and it's replicating white supremacy. It's a very powerful [harmful] narrative that you can read your way out of racism."

Taylor agrees. "Conventional American capitalist culture trains and rewards people for being so disembodied. It's almost a prerequisite for being smart and successful. This makes it even more challenging for people to actually drop from the head into the body. For lots of folks, it's a very smart and effective survival strategy to not feel things."

It is not impossible to unlearn this resistance to listening to one's body. Taylor continues, "I generally don't experience people's resistance as conscious. Dominant culture has trained us to believe that feeling makes us vulnerable, and being vulnerable makes us unsafe. People of color in general, and women in particular, are punished for expressing their emotions. They are called crazy, weak, unprofessional, or worse. As a result, very few of us have any meaningful practice being vulnerable in ways that do not feel like, or that are not perceived, as if we're spiraling out of control, especially in professional and public spaces. And that's where the healing comes in. People have to see the opportunity of feeling, the liability of not feeling, and be in an environment where we can practice and model vulnerable leadership. This is the gateway to our movements being informed by more holistic and embodied relationships."

Kyla Hartsfield, Project Director at CompassPoint, believes that "organizations who are committed to pro-Blackness have to have a healing justice lens. They can't be separated." As a Black Southern woman, Hartsfield remembers an experience from attending a train-the-trainer workshop for Black women: "We got to lay eyes on each other, we got to break bread, we got to laugh with each other, we got to see each other cry and really heal in that way of being in person and be seen. And I remember physically feeling my shoulders, like lower a little bit, my back straightened up and leaned back. It was just a transformation that I'll never forget as well as it feels so good to be able to put your shoulders down and to not have to always look behind your back and try to be the next step ahead of people."

Sloan Perry says that "getting people out of

their [work] element” helps them build their muscle memory for embodiment experiences. She explains, “The kind of teamwork and process that isn’t about an organizational outcome, like cooking together, can get at some stuff in ways that are less fraught. Being in nature is another helpful way.”

The care that the RE practitioners put into the logistics of bringing people together is also an important aspect of healing as well. This can include care packages, nourishing food at the gathering, stipends, reiki or massages, and music. One RE practitioner gives participants “tasks where they can add sparkle to them, like adding songs to a collective playlist.”



Johana Bencomo says, “When we gather everyone, Women’s Democracy Lab pays for everything: flights, room and board, so that the women feel taken care of and supported. A lot of us already feel underpaid. Our intent is to create a place of rest and joy and community. We’re very intentional about how we take care of them.”

Simone Thelemaque at CompassPoint says, “I take a lot of pride in making sure the food is nourishing and the space is safe. All of that mindfulness is deeply, deeply, deeply healing for folks who are often not offered spaciousness to feel or to just be. I happen to love taking care of my people. It just becomes such a labor of love.” This level of care and accommodations are often expected or taken for granted by white leaders. Especially for Black women who have been denied them, both professionally and personally, even when they are in leadership or executive positions, these “labor of love” gestures from the practitioners can be both healing and validating.

#### **TOWARD A HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIP TO POWER**

As Anouska Bhattacharyya at YWCA Boston says, “Our previous trauma can prevent us from being inclusive or feeling included.” J. Miakoda Taylor at Fierce Allies agrees, “The work is not possible if people are not recognizing the way in which trauma informs their behaviors, their thinking, their history, their vision, their ability to see what’s possible, their willingness to take

**“ The work is not possible if people are not recognizing the way in which trauma informs their behaviors, their thinking, their history, their vision, their ability to see what’s possible, their willingness to take risks and to dream something that’s not yet in existence.**

**J. Miakoda Taylor**  
Fierce Allies

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**Credit:** Carlo Allegri/Reuters

**Caption:** People protest in the street outside a protest to defund the police in a place they are calling the “City Hall Autonomous Zone” in support of “Black Lives Matter” in the Manhattan borough of New York City, New York, U.S., June 30, 2020.




risks and to dream something that’s not yet in existence.” Because a lot of RE organizational development work, as demonstrated in the next section on “inclusive governance,” is about sharing power, a significant part of healing and repair is about building a healthier relationship to power. And that could look different for white people and people of color (or other communities that have been denied self-determination historically). According to Yee Won Chong at Western States Center, people, white or BIPOC, sometimes avoid power, because of past trauma from being on either side of power-wielding. He says, “But we have all these people who are working on equity in government and larger nonprofits and there’s a lot of power. So how do we not leave power on the table? How do we leverage that? And we then realize we actually have to first have a conversation of how do we view power?” Unlearning unhealthy relationships cannot happen, says Chong, if we cannot have honest discussions about that trauma.

White people, especially organizational leaders, are not bystanders in this healing process, but active participants. White people, because of their racial and sometimes their positional privilege, often replicate the trauma for people of color. For instance, while Bhattacharyya

believes that leadership development for women of color is worthwhile, its impact could be limited without some intervention from white leaders in power. She says, “People think we just need to give these women [of color] more opportunities, right? It’s the system that we need to change. The places where we’ve seen the greatest achievement in gender parity are where we have not only focused on folks with marginalized gendered identities but where we’ve thought about the folks who have the greatest power in the room. If we only focus on women of color in our programs, we’re actually missing an opportunity to influence a lot of power that already exists.” Some RE practitioners cite similar examples of white-led organizations putting their DEI initiatives on the backs of people of color, especially Black women, while their white leaders are not putting in the work of self-examination and transformation.

Ron White at Humboldt Area Foundation says, “I don’t really believe in centering white people in racial justice struggle, but white people need to see themselves as part of the story. Doing the right thing because it’s the right thing only takes people so far. One of the things I learned from organizing is that self-interest rules.” White refers to John A. Powell’s approach of targeted universalism—the idea



that processes that target specific populations, especially the most marginalized, can bring universal benefits. To White, white people need to see how they can benefit from racial equity, lest they become saviors or martyrs. This is especially relevant to places like Humboldt County where white people still make up a supermajority of the region. White says, “If they didn’t do the work, it wasn’t gonna get done.”

Bhattacharyya agrees, “Very candidly I think one of the most harmful narratives when it comes to racial equity is the idea that white people need to save people of color, that this is sort of a saviorism or a charitable thing. But your liberation is tied to mine, which is tied to others, so this is not a charity effort. I think it’s really dangerous precisely because people have really great intentions. But when they see racial equity in terms of charity, they’ve divided a line in the sand. And that actually reduces the humanity of the folks that you might be trying to reach out to. But it also dehumanizes

yourself and limits the ways in which you will benefit from increased racial equity.”

Healing is often cast as the work of those who suffer from trauma; that is, those who need to heal. But healing is also the work of those who have caused harm. Healing is not complete when those who have caused harm do not change their behavior and stop the hurting. Illustrating some of the strategies covered in this section, the case study below discusses how Fierce Allies has used an embodied healing practice with one of their client partners, “to resource [them]selves to navigate tension and conflict.” This somatic tool has helped the white leaders examine and reimagine their relationship to power.

## REACH COHORT MEMBER: **FIERCE ALLIES**

### CLIENT PARTNER: **LISA DONAHUE AND LUCIA COLOMBARO, VARIOUS ORGANIZATIONS**



Lisa Donahue is a leader impacting many individuals and organizations in the nature connection field. She began working with Fierce Allies in July 2020, with a commitment to hold herself accountable for the forms of white supremacy and colonization present in the community and to better position herself to leverage her positional power to increase the field’s capacity to do the same. BIPOC members of the nature connection field, especially Indigenous community members, had spoken up over many years about the harm caused by the field’s rampant misappropriation and commodification of Indigenous lifeways. They were met with no capacity to cease harm.

One of the organizations where Donahue served as a board chair, for instance, had a land-based framework that was “inspired” by “indigenous cultures around the world.” In 2018, a member of the organization’s community died in a sweat lodge held on the organization’s

white founder’s land. This tragic death caused harm not only to the community member’s surviving family (including her husband and son), friends, and community but also to the reputation of the sweat lodge and the Native community to whom this practice of purification ceremony belongs. In a Harm Impact Statement presented at the time, Donahue listed those who were harmed beyond the victim’s family and community: “All of those who were present on the land that day...The Native community Jumano Apache of Redford, Texas, who considered [the victim] an adopted member. The reputation of the [Inipi](#) ceremony. All Native people. The Native people who practice Inipi. Other people who practice Inipi. Future generations of people, Native or otherwise, who might practice/benefit from Inipi.”

In 2020, the victim’s family filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the organization, its founder, and several others. Because of the pending lawsuit, the organization’s lawyers advised implicated parties not to speak to each other about the case, so as to not generate evidence. This caused those involved to become suspicious of one another and thwarted any impulse toward a restorative justice process.

When George Floyd was murdered later that year, the organization, like so many at the time, released a statement of support and commitment to anti-racism. Donahue said the statement was not met with universal approval, as members of their community spoke up to ask, “How can you make these statements when your practices don’t back it up?” Donahue added, “These were not from strangers. These were from people who knew us for a long time. While initially I felt defensive, I appreciated the feedback.” One suggestion Donahue received was to reach out to J. Miakoda Taylor at Fierce Allies.

The Harm Impact Statement that Donahue wrote was part of her initial work with Taylor. It is a restorative justice tool, where offenders take responsibility for the harm they have caused





**Credit:** Fierce Allies' Reckoning + Reparations Practicum

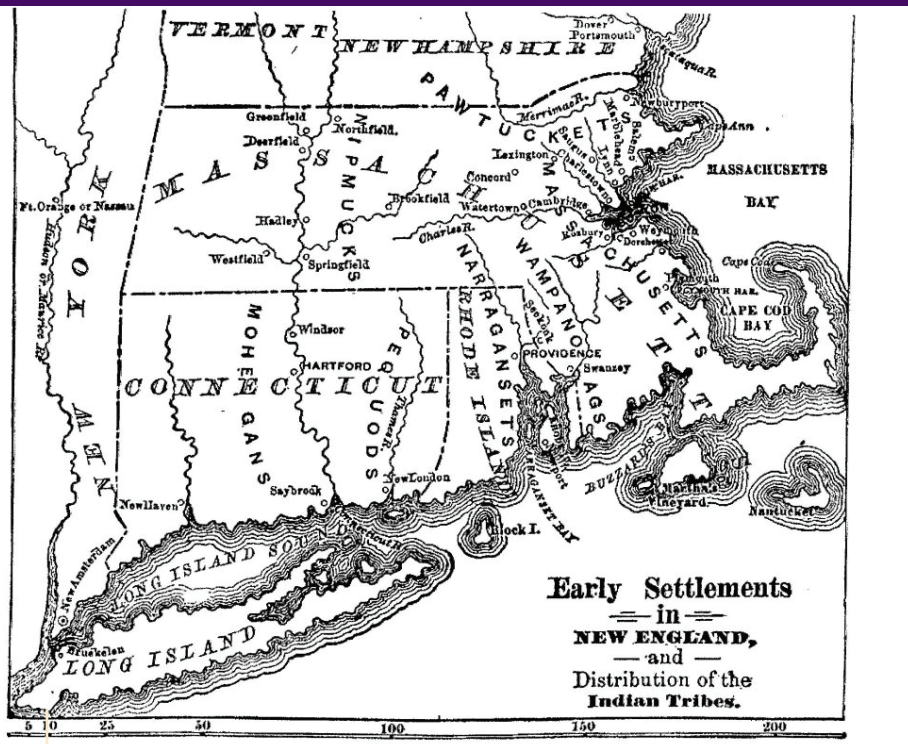
and write a detailed account of the event, noting what happened, who was impacted, and how their lives were affected by the events. The Harm Impact Statement is part of the Fierce Allies' [Reckoning and Reparations](#) practicum, a reparations preparedness training for people wanting to disrupt their complicity in harmful patterns, repair what was harmed, rematriate what was stolen, and leverage their various forms of power for healing and restoring right relationships. Writing this statement illuminated how the community member's death was an extreme consequence of the organization's elaborate history and "constellation of harms." Following the Harm Impact Statement, Donahue and Taylor began tailoring the Reckoning and Reparations practicum in order to lead a process of accountability and meaningful change within the organization being called into account for this tragic event. However, after the "introductory" session with Fierce Allies, it became clear to Donahue that the organization did not have the will to continue this work of collective accountability. According to Taylor, the white male staff were particularly obstructive to the initial process. In response, Donahue, as board chair, initiated and completed the process to dissolve the organization.

The death of a community member might be an extreme example of the disconnect from the values around the Indigenous lifeways an organization supposedly espoused. But this disconnect from the values of centering community, using restorative justice, and

holding each other accountable in the face of conflict and harm was nevertheless common throughout the field.

However painful and difficult this episode was, Donahue was committed to carrying out the Reckoning and Reconciliations practicum in the broader nature connection field, and she asked Taylor at Fierce Allies to support the work she was doing at the Nature Connection Network (NCN). NCN's mission is to encourage and support its member organizations in building healthy, resilient, and regenerative communities. NCN members include schools and community-based organizations that teach various forms of Indigenous knowledge and lifeways through curricula commonly referred to as "nature connection." The network's Leadership Circle is made up of NCN member representatives, including Donahue. In 2022, the organization initiated what the leaders call a "Transformational Year," which was a response—admittedly an overdue one—to long-standing and increasingly vocal complaints from its Indigenous members about cultural misappropriation.

Many of the white-led nature connection organizations in the NCN community have a history of misappropriating and commodifying Indigenous knowledge and lifeways without permission or reciprocal compensation. The absence of meaningful relationships between the nature connection teachers of these ideas and the lineages from which they originate is not only an extractive process that often leads to



**Caption:** Early settlements in New England showing an distribution of Indian Tribes.

the integrity of the teaching being compromised, but it is also a harmful misrepresentation of the culture and context from which these teachings come, if that context is mentioned at all.

When Lucia Colombaro was invited to join the NCN Leadership Circle, she was given the charge of “interrupting patterns of harm, in particular addressing the question of basing the livelihoods of white-led ‘nature connection’ organizations on the cultural misappropriation of Indigenous lifeways.” In November 2022, Colombaro, as the newest member of the NCN Leadership Circle at the time, shared her own journey on this topic for the organization she founded on the NCN website. She writes:

“In reaching out to BI&PoC educators to work with me, I was asked right away if I had done a Permission Ask of the Massachusett Tribe to use the land we had rented for our program. My pursuit of a Permission Ask quickly opened up much bigger questions for me, foremost among them:

*“What do the members of the Massachusett Tribe want from this land?”*

*“What do they want for their children and themselves in ‘eliminating barriers between themselves and the natural world’?”*

“As I brought these questions to Faries Gray, the Sagamore of the Massachusett Tribe, the ‘matrix’ of our cultural worldview dissolved; these questions were not intellectual, philosophical, or program-related questions anymore; they were literal...

“Faries was answering the questions about what the Massachusett Tribe wanted from this land and for their children, families, and communities. And here I was, coming from the experience of so many nature connection network organizations and schools, living day-to-day what Faries wanted for his children on their ancestral land with this crux: teaching Indigenous lifeways and in direct contact with the land on a daily basis, and making a living doing it.

“I cannot get past this. It is not right.”<sup>12</sup>

12 “NCN.” n.d. NCN. <https://www.natureconnection.network/>.

J. Miakoda Taylor was also no stranger to NCN or the dynamics Colombaro described. Over the previous decade, Taylor at Fierce Allies had done intensive leadership training and curriculum redesign work with another white-led nature connection organization. This group had already established itself as one of the field's standard bearers for being in appropriate relationships with the teachers and lineages where their work originates. That said, they were unable to retain BIPOC participants in their year-long-intensive program. They engaged Taylor to help them recognize, interrogate, and dismantle the settler colonialism tendencies undermining their retention of BIPOC participants. Taylor explains, "The BIPOC participants were dropping out not because the white facilitators were sharing misappropriated content or delivering it improperly, but because they were experiencing unconscious microaggressions from the other white participants, and the white leadership team was unable to skillfully navigate and facilitate these harmful offenses. The people of color could only endure so much before they would drop out of the program." (Since working with Taylor in 2018, this organization's BIPOC retention rate has changed from 1% to 55% and BIPOC staff composition for adult programs increased from 25% to 60%.)

Colombaro also remembers seeing Taylor co-present at the annual NCN conference in 2021 with Pinar Sinopoulos-Lloyd of Queer Nature, calling the field at large to collectively direct their attention towards efforts of reparation and rematriation. According to Colombaro, NCN made a "concerted effort" to have BIPOC speakers like Taylor and Sinopoulos-Lloyd at the conference. While their presentation generated "a surge of energy, connection, and hope," there was "a lack of capacity and receptivity for this majority white group to know how to integrate that and work equitably and reparatively." So when Donahue invited Colombaro to be her "accountability partner" in her individual leadership development work with Taylor, Colombaro thought it was the perfect opportunity for her to leverage this opportunity to make changes at NCN.



**Caption:** NCN 2023 Leadership Circle members during a retreat.

Clockwise: Amy Hyatt, Iya Oludoye, Lisa Donahue, Estephanie Martinez-Alfonzo, Maggie Gotterer, and Lucia Colombaro.

From the beginning of NCN's Transformational Year, the Leadership Circle had a stated intention to be transparent, with membership and others, about their individual and collective self-examination. On their website, they acknowledge the criticism they have received, detail the work they are undertaking, and invite members' participation in the next steps. They have held online discussions "to share our commitments, thinking, and new financial and structural models, all stemming from our commitment to cease harm and break the patterns that perpetuate it, be more conscientious visitors on stolen land, and co-create an advancement of nature connection that is rooted in service to and love for all Life on Earth starting with each other."

The conversations were not comfortable. Along the way, the Leadership Circle has lost some people. Colombaro says, "Leading up to the commitment to the Transformational Year, people took themselves out. I think it's worth observing that all the white men had left, as well as one of the four white women. And then I came in. We've been this group of six women working through a shared leadership model for the past year." A few of the men who left were the same obstructive parties Taylor referred to in the other organizational work they had done with Donahue.

Both Donahue and Colombaro credit Fierce Allies in helping them become more aware of their relationship to power as white leaders, and that "with practice, we can embody and walk a different way in the world, with our dignity and vulnerability." Donahue says, "One of the first practices that Miakoda introduced, in the first session that I had with them, is the Dignity Practice. You're invited to close your





eyes or soften your gaze and really consider all the ways in which your body takes up space and is connected both to the earth and to your historical ancestors and future generations.”

Taylor further explains about this “somatic tool for trauma healing” that is “foundational” to their practice: “The Dignity Practice is an adaptation of the Generative Somatics centering practice. At the core, it is designed to support people to fully inhabit your body, release the contractions that both make one small and undermine your ability to feel and make your fullest, wisest self available to impact as well as be impacted by and respond to what is happening around you, especially the feedback you are unable or uncomfortable letting in. It’s also a tool for slowing things down. Ultimately, we’re really giving ourselves access to the resources of our skin, the earth, our length, our depth, which includes what’s behind us, the past, and what’s in front of us, the future. All kinds of new responses become possible when we have all of those dimensions consciously and humbly alive and integrated into our individual and collective body. People are invited to track and share the sensations that are alive in their bodies as difficult conversations or thoughts are coming through. This combination slows things down and allows people to be impacted by each other, allies and adversaries alike, in ways that are much more choiceful, skillful, and holistic. As a group practice, it also allows us to re-member ourselves to one another, and all of our other relations, as one collective body, as one ecosystem.”

Donahue says, “This is a practice that we did at the beginning of every session, and it took me some time personally to really feel the

power of it. But it’s something that now I use almost all the time just to understand my own power—where I abuse it or where I don’t use the power that I have—and what healthy power looks like. I can do it internally. We would even take turns facilitating it in our sessions with Miakoda. We also did a practice called Memoir of Power which helped me understand my historical relationship to power and the ways in which that relationship was formed from past experiences, which was quite revealing and very uncomfortable. And now I can walk with that understanding and create for myself a path that says, ‘I have power. I can use it in a healthy way. I can make change in a way that reflects who I am and why I’m here, and how I came to live in this body, in this life. If my goal is to upset and disrupt other structures of power, I have to be able to understand my own before I can do that. I didn’t learn that in school or in any organization. It was almost unseen to me.’”

Taylor went on to facilitate Donahue and Colombaro’s learning, un-learning and development using tools and practices from the Reckoning and Reparations practicum. The practicum helps participants locate themselves more expansively within an ecosystem (connection to earth and others) and across time (connection to ancestors and future generations). Colombaro finds this “relational” focus (as opposed to “transactional” or “extractive”) resonates with the reparative compensation work that she was asked to lead at NCN. This alignment enables her to bring these values into the larger network. Colombaro says, “We have access to practitioners and teachers [like Taylor] who have fully developed pedagogies and curricula that serve the different aspects of what people go through when they start to engage an anti-racist and decolonizing work.”

Colombaro reflects, “I found the work with Miakoda to be deeply liberating. I think the biggest impact for me is the repeated experience of giving ourselves the permission to not repeat these patterns that make me feel sick to my stomach and that I can visibly see cause harm, and permission to

do things differently, to unlearn just so many of the obstacles to and restraints onto my own capacity to be consciously, intentionally interrupting dynamics that are harmful, and to hold questions. And also just this deep affirmation of never ceding our dignity.”

The NCN Leadership Circle wants to make the liberatory practice of the Reckoning & Reparations practicum available to every member in NCN but recognizes that members—white people and BIPOC—might have different histories with (internalized) white supremacy and therefore at different places of this journey.



Moved by a lack of capacity by previous members of NCN Leadership to engage collaboratively with Fierce Allies and other BIPOC leaders within the network, Colombaro and two BIPOC members in the Leadership Circle designed “The Collaborative Developmental Ecosystem,” or the CoDE. As part of the “Transformational Year,” the CoDE started with gauging the capacity of a group of ready members, or early adopters, to take on this work. In the next phase, the CoDE will work with all members to self-identify their will in adopting a decolonizing approach to this work and the challenges unique to their organizations. Members are then able to find others with similar issues or concerns to build a specific community of practice, facilitated by practitioners with appropriate skills. In short, the CoDE leverages pockets of solidarity within the existing network and cultivates receptivity where before there was not. The Reckoning & Reparations practicum offered by Fierce Allies is by design a part of the CoDE. In addition,

the process of growing the CoDE is revealing and valuing other resources and skills that are already available within the network, particularly from BIPOC practitioners. Currently, NCN is looking at collaborative grant-seeking and a new membership fee structure, so that everyone can have access to the resources available in the CoDE that they could not afford on their own. In doing so, the network aspires to move towards a more relational paradigm, whereas before it was more hierarchical and transactional.

“We definitely have a horizon that we’re looking towards,” continues Colombaro, “but with an understanding that this is emergent and iterative work. That doesn’t make it amorphous or infinite, but inherent in the work is that it’s a learning process.”

Donahue adds, “We are absolutely dedicated to working relationally. We’re dedicated to being in service to our member organizations. And that for me is at odds with a rigid timeframe. We can’t take everyone with us at first, but we do not intend to leave anyone behind. Everybody’s on their own journey. I can talk about the sense of urgency and the need for racial equity today or 200 years ago, but it doesn’t change how humans work and how change necessarily needs supportive relationships. That is a process that will take time.”

“Another point of clarity came from Faries Gray of the Massachusetts Tribe,” says Colombaro. “He asked, ‘Why do you [Europeans] keep sending your unwanted?’ as we looked at the [Harbor Islands](#) [across the Boston Harbor]. From that vantage point, looking out over the water, I began to see literally the energetic and physical flow of people out of Europe to the rest of the world as colonizers. I recognize that his question is one that I must consider and look to for guidance forward: the fact that Europeans have unwanted is a source of harm. We have to find a way not to have unwanted people in our work. So what we’re really putting forth in NCN is to allow and support people to determine when they’re ready to step closer in alignment with the new premises and principles.”





## 02 B.3 INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

Governance, or how decisions are made in an organization, is one area where RE practitioners are decolonizing the nonprofit industrial complex. To Tracy Kunkler at Circle Forward, racial equity is baked into governance. Circle Forward supports networks and networked organizations to co-design and integrate systems of consent-based collaborative governance that are fit for purpose. Kunkler says, “It’s not governance in a box. It’s not about having six people around the table when we used to have two. It’s not about finding a copy of bylaws off of the Internet and pasting our name on it. It’s a humbling and layered conversation about inner work, examining unspoken rules and norms, and shared learning.”

Traditional governance models place decision-making power in the hands of the same few leaders, even though their decisions affect other people in the organization more directly, especially those on the margins, who must suffer the consequences of these decisions without consent. Consent is not consensus—not everyone has to be part of every decision made at an organization, but neither is it majority rules. Dee Washington, also at Circle Forward, says, “Even democracy has its level of violence. If I can get 51% of the voters to agree with me, to hell with the other 49%. The principle of consent has to be in place.” That principle requires that “people responsible for decisions take time to identify, and be transparent about, who is included in the process and how.”

In the case of Nature Connection Network (from the previous case study), a small group

of leaders were driving its “Transformational Year.” They anticipated the changes would be well received by some member organizations and make others uncomfortable. Two of the leaders, Lisa Donahue and Lucia Colombaro, say they are very clear that they do not want to leave anyone behind.

“The leadership circle has stepped forward in accountability to develop a set of premises and principles<sup>13</sup>,” says Colombaro. “We spent a lot of time debating whether to tell members to take it or leave it. You’re either on board or you’re not. And what came out of that, at the guidance and insistence of two BIPOC leadership circle members, is that there has to be a third way. It can’t be just binary: yes, no. You have to give people an opportunity to be cautious, to be uncertain, or even resistant. We believe in people working from will.”

That “third way” of “working from will” is similar to what Washington at Circle Forward describes as “consent-based” decision-making.<sup>14</sup> To reach consent, NCN is updating its website to transparently acknowledge past harm and share the details of the Transformational Year and the proposed changes, holding online discussions and informational sessions, convening the executive directors of its member organizations, and pausing their conference, which is NCN’s flagship annual event, in order to focus on this work. Elsewhere in this report, Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz at RoadMap Consulting describes the work of RE organizational development as an “organizing project.” Similarly, by building community, fostering mutual support, and sharing ideas for deeper transformation, these NCN activities try to mobilize everyone towards the same direction even if they are starting from different points in the equity journey.

13 “Premises + Principles.” n.d. NCN. <https://www.natureconnection.network/premises-principles>.

14 “The Consent Principle | Circle Forward.” n.d. Circleforward.us. <https://circleforward.us/the-consent-principle/>.

Washington says of consent-based decision-making: “All of this takes a lot of time. The reason why it takes so much time is because fundamentally you’re building trust. The only way to build trust is, when I say I’m hurting, you care. So the work of building consent-based communities is a...I won’t say slow... it’s a front-loaded process because there is a lot of work that has to be done first and it takes time. Once we have trust and consent, we are flowing and things move much more quickly in decision-making. But in the beginning, it’s a lot of weeding through power dimensions, fears, and concerns.”

Inclusive governance doesn’t mean everyone has an equal say, but it’s not always the people with the highest positional power that has the most say either, which is closer to the more traditional and hierarchical approach. In the case of DC Greens, an equitable approach might mean people on whom a decision will make the most impact should have more say. As part of the RE organizational development work, DC Greens adopted a [RASCI framework](#). The framework has significant equity implications. Fatimah Ahmad explains, “In the past, if I was the person whose job responsibility aligned with the work of [a working] group and had the training and experience, my opinion could still be discarded if the other people [in the working group] just agreed with each other—which was strange.” Using the RASCI chart, the new way of decision-making elevates people with responsibilities and skill sets most related to a decision (the R, or responsible, in the RASCI framework), sometimes even over those with higher positional power, who is likely to serve the consulting (C) or informed (I) role.

Other bodies were developed in DC Greens for specific decisions. For instance, an Equity Cell was established, composed of staff from different levels. Among other things, this group is charged to review the equitable distribution of labor in DC Greens, and along with the executive director, has approval power over the organization’s hiring plan.

Inclusive governance also requires people to approach disagreements and conflicts in a healthy way, a difficult skill for many to master. Instead of holding tensions generatively, most people tend to avoid it. Anouska Bhattacharyya at YWCA Boston says, “Dissent is not a dirty word, but most of us are socialized to not rock the boat, to keep opinions to ourselves. Or we feel if I disagreed with you, somehow I’ve caused harm. Ultimately, we can’t have a candid conversation. If you are my boss and I think, well, you like Kit Kats, so I’m just gonna keep my mouth shut about Snickers. So teaching folks how to offer up different viewpoints, especially when the stakes get higher than a candy bar, is really important. It may be you still decide as my boss to go ahead and only offer Kit Kats, but at least I feel like I did justice to myself by sharing what I thought was preferable.”

To turn away from a traditional model of leadership that has a false veneer of perfectionism, infallibility, and absolute authority, vulnerability is essential. Mark Liu at Grassroots Global Justice Alliance says, “There’ll be some level of accountability people want from leaders. Their feelings might get hurt. So it’s important to make sure leaders feel resourced and present and have the capacity to not to be reactive, but actually really listen and take things in.” Setting this tone, Liu believes, allows “people to be vulnerable and share their truths and then hopefully be able to move forward and actually have some type of resolution or restoration. People have to be able to come with their best selves and are willing to take some level of risk and be uncomfortable.”

In addition to vulnerability, inclusiveness is another essential ingredient. RE practitioners set the tone and expectations of inclusiveness early on in their engagement. Cynthia Silva Parker at Interaction Institute for Social Change explains, “In the early stages, it’s always important to have an internal team that is guiding the work that isn’t just the management team or the leadership team, or all people with positional power. There needs to be a vehicle where staff at different levels can contribute to the thinking about how we are moving this

## 02 B.4 FIELD BUILDING AND NETWORKED ECOLOGIES

conversation and this work forward together.”

Dee Washington adds that people who are most impacted need to be integrated because “their voices get left out the most, especially in racial equity work.” To her, the inclusion of those most impacted is not only to have better strategies, but the work of inclusion is itself the strategy. “The development of an integrated group of people with different power dynamics” is the model for democracy that we envision.

To illustrate this, Washington and Kunkler share an example of a client, whom Circle Forward has supported in building a more consent-based governance system by including “organizers and people who are impacted by the food systems, and working people of color.” By hearing these voices, the white leaders were “deeply appalled” by the harm that they had caused. Kunkler says, “Consent brings the stuff out from under the rug. The relationship and the trust that had been built through this consent process really allowed the self-reflection and accountability for the harm that was happening in that group. It launched them into deeper equity work.”

A consent governance process emphasizes that equity work is not just an intellectual or technical project, but a relational one. Washington remarks, “I’ve done racial equity and systems change work before, but it was the first time I’d ever seen white people backed into understanding their role in creating spaces of inequity the way I did with [this organization], where it became a launching point for deeper transformation.”

Capacity building typically focuses on individual leaders or organizations. Another liberatory practice in RE organizational development takes capacity building more broadly to the movement ecosystem level. Many RE practitioners convene and cultivate networks and cohorts of leaders from different issue areas, and sometimes from across different regions as well. These “communities of practice” decrease isolations among movement leaders, facilitate peer learning, allow them to imagine different (often intersectional) possibilities, and give them the courage to experiment with these possibilities in their home organizations.

RE practitioners occupy a unique role in designing, organizing, and facilitating these cohorts and networks for field and movement building purposes. They are the ones who provide tools and support systems that encourage learning and collaboration across organizations. They also work in different ecosystems and so have a balcony view of the issues, trends, gaps, challenges, and opportunities and are positioned to be movement weavers, cross-systems communicators, and seed planters for collective change.

Networks address some of the limitations of the nonprofit industrial complex at the organizational level discussed in an earlier part of the report. Especially for people in organizations that are fraught with tensions, networks are, says Elissa Sloan Perry at Change Elemental, “an opportunity to build trusted space where folks can actually practice and make mistakes and work through them where there aren’t reporting relationships, where there isn’t history in the same way as when



you're working in an organizational context. So there's opportunity and space for greater risk-taking. There's an opportunity for greater self-transformation outside of the organizational context than within it, because our kryptonite, our weak points, are often things that our organizational culture or systems depend on."

Networks are often a place for collective healing, especially for BIPOC leaders. Vanessa Bird, at the Center for Diversity in the Environment, says, "Indigenous, Black, and people of color working in the environmental movement, from communities that are at the frontline of climate justice, are burning out from the white supremacy culture in their organizations. These folks are asking for a space for community care, a place to do that healing work together."

Maro Guevara at CompassPoint explains further, "I think the value of CompassPoint is our ability to bring folks together, convening folks and building community...designing spaces for people to learn together. That's what we hear back from a lot of folks. This gave them a space to break out of isolation and to see a different way of being modeled in front of them, to think about leadership differently. They saw how facilitators who disagreed in the moment supported each other and pivoted

into shared leadership. This way of holding space and dialectically figuring things out in the moment is a very different kind of learning, different, for example from depositing a bunch of skills on people, and different than trying to "skill up" and assimilate them to a very narrow idea of what a professional is. Instead, it's saying, there's a lot of gifts and wisdom here, and what we need to do is change organizational structure to reflect the gifts and wisdom that people bring to the table."

For the movement ecosystem, some networks support leaders in aligning their political analysis and strategies across issue areas. As Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz at RoadMap Consulting says, "If you see capacity building as rooted in building collective political power, then we need to help organizations stay networked and interdependent and work through what I call the big, architectural, and strategic issues of our time. Our opposition is deadly. Our lives are at stake...We are in a time of growing fascism and authoritarianism. The more siloed organizations and movement leaders and ecosystems are, the harder it is for us to build collective political power." To her, capacity-building work is not neutral. She adds, "I don't think we get to do capacity building without an analysis of our opposition."





Many RE practitioners—in and outside of the REACH cohort—gather leaders not just to sharpen and align their political analysis and strategies, but also, in Weiner-Mahfuz’s words, ask the difficult questions like “What are we building to scale, and what tools do we need in these times?” RE practitioners support these types of networks, like the Global Grassroots Justice Alliance (GGJ) and Nature Connection Network in previous case studies and the Women’s Democracy Lab in the case study in this section. For GGJ, the ecosystem is both international and intersectional. Mark Liu explains, “Grassroots Global Justice is made up of over 60 primarily frontline grassroots-based building organizations in the US. It was mainly created to connect grassroots movement groups on the ground in the US with international social movements to share learnings and create and move strategy together. We’ve been involved at different levels around the intersection of demilitarization, climate justice, and feminist economy. We are now in the stages of putting out a vision for a regenerative economy that we’re trying to build towards.” In cases like GGJ, networks enrich the movement ecosystem by, in the words of Elissa Sloan Perry, “allowing for the opportunity to dig into the complexity of intersectionality, and seeing our organizations in relationships with other organizations, from different issue areas.”

Networks can also diffuse innovations in the sector. Practitioners also cited examples

where cohort participants have taken tools and processes, like collective governance and generative conflict mediation, back to their home organizations. In return, these networks are often spaces where RE practitioners receive feedback from real-world applications that they can use to sharpen their tools and approaches. Mala Nagarajan at Vega Mala Consulting has been convening a group of clients that she had helped to integrate her compensation framework. She explains, “The initial reason for

## “ The network is the strategy.

**Dee Washington**  
Circle Forward

the community of practice was to introduce how much the framework had changed. Compared with what we implemented in earlier iterations, we were wrestling with and engaging with much more complex, radical, and reparative compensation factors. And so we wanted to bring all the other organizations together to say, hey, here’s the newest stuff that we’re doing so that you can consider whether it makes sense for your organization. They also had a chance to share the pain points of transition, learn how other organizations were addressing new system challenges, and request tools that would help them improve their compensation system across the whole employee lifecycle.



And I could then help build some tools and materials around that to support them.”

Some RE practitioners in the REACH cohort add that these practitioner-facilitated cohorts also ensure respectful and responsible sharing of knowledge. Without proper guidance, some organizations may hastily adapt these liberatory tools outside of networks without honoring the lineages from which they come, to the point of co-opting or culturally misappropriating them or even diluting their usefulness. For example, the researchers for this project have wanted to focus on healing justice as a topic for liberatory practices. We were reminded that the healing justice concept, with its lineages from the Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, should not be conflated with self-care or the right to comfort (or the right to be free from discomfort). Another practitioner cautions, “Our understanding from Cara Page and other leaders in developing the healing justice framework, is that the nonprofit organizational model itself is at odds with healing justice. It is important for us that healing justice be used with the greatest rigor and integrity, and not used loosely as a way to talk about the importance of healing in anti-racist organizational change.” When organized by practitioners that have deep knowledge of these practices, networks can better ensure this and other liberatory tools be implemented across the field “with the greatest rigor and integrity.”

Communities of practice can have impact on individual, organizational, and movement levels. RE practitioners in the REACH cohort have shared many instances of people taking what they’ve learned from these networks

and implementing more equitable practices in their home organizations and starting new collaborations between unexpected allies. Network members have also banded together to influence funders and public agencies for more responsive policies and practices. But because these networks are relational and emergent, these stories of transformation are “unknowable” in advance.

To Dee Washington at Circle Forward, “the network is the strategy.” She gives the following analogy: “Many people who approach this work believe they are creating a garden. Some funders prefer gardens and have little patience for ecosystems. As a result, nonprofits often find themselves trapped in a cycle. They must grow a garden and capture a visually appealing image for the funder. However, what they are actually building is an ecosystem, which can be messy and challenging. It can resemble more of a jungle with vibrant micro-systems embedded within it that help the overall system flourish.”



As the case study in this section shows, RE practitioners with this liberatory practice are not short-term fixers that go away once harms are repaired or infrastructure is put into place. They are, as Weiner-Mahfuz says, “the glue...that brings the analysis with the set of issues they’re facing and really think through how they can reinvent and deepen themselves in order to be ready for the opposition that we’re contending now and the future...We bring an organizer’s mind to it.” They are long-term builders that are a permanent part of the movement ecosystems.

## REACH COHORT MEMBER: **CHANGE ELEMENTAL**

## CLIENT PARTNER: **WOMEN'S DEMOCRACY LAB**



The Women's Democracy Lab (WDL) convenes cohorts of elected officials who are women with intersectional identities to “radically reimagine political leadership” that focuses on sharing power and “decolonizing the political process and our own mindset about it.” Within WDL, Johana Bencomo is the program manager for the Future Presidents Project, which is “a national, cohort-based fellowship designed to provide a supportive and transformative space that allows women to find solidarity amongst themselves, build a national network of support, and strengthen the leadership skills they need for continued service and advancement to higher office.”

Bencomo explains its origins: “Future Presidents Project was really born out of Sayu Bhojwani’s incredible imagination and support for women of color in elected office. She thought of it when she was at New American Leaders, which is a candidate training program for people with immigrant experiences. She always says that we haven’t had a woman president, not for lack of aspiration, but for lack of affirmation. And so she wanted to bring that sort of spirit into a program that supported

women once they were already elected.”

Bencomo is more than the WDL’s project manager. As a city council member in Las Cruces, New Mexico, Bencomo was a participant in its first cohort in 2020. Elissa Sloan Perry from Change Element was the designer and facilitator for that cohort. Even though the pandemic had made everything virtual, Bencomo says, “It was the most incredible facilitation I had experienced in a long time. It wasn’t a set curriculum training. It was really emergent and emotional.”

Now in its second iteration, the fellowship consists of two in-person gatherings among the cohort of 16 women that bookend their time together, with several virtual sessions in between. Bencomo explains, “Women’s Democracy Lab pays for everything: flights, room and board, and meals so that the women feel taken care of and they feel supported, especially since a lot of us are in underpaid positions.” Bencomo and Sloan Perry share facilitation responsibilities, with Bencomo bringing in the perspectives of a peer legislator for the women in the cohort.

The emergent approach and the focus on rest and replenishment always catch many participants, who expect a more traditional approach to leadership development, by surprise. Many of these women, including Bencomo herself, have gone through traditional candidate training programs, with “a very set curriculum, like you practice storytelling on this day, you practice fundraising on this day.” While Bencomo thinks these programs can be effective and necessary, she says, “What we were really trying to do is focus less on those skills because frankly, these women are doing it already. They’re winning, they’re governing, but they’re governing alone. They’re governing while experiencing harassment.”

The emergent nature means that the curriculum has to be adapted to each cohort, and Bencomo and Sloan Perry are ready to deviate even from this short-term planning if something unexpected takes center stage at these sessions. Bencomo





✦ Credit: Women's Democracy Lab

says, “We’re trying to tailor the curriculum to the women and not the other way around. We have set modules. For instance, we talk about power, like power within and building shared power, and disrupting white supremacist culture outside and inside of us. But it just looks different for every single cohort. I think that’s what makes us effective. We’re trying to provide a space where we’re learning together.”

Bencomo describes a ritual that Sloan Perry uses at the beginning of each cohort to set the tone and prepare the participants for the open space: “The first time we’re all together we invite everyone to bring an item with them that represents their ancestry, their lineage. And we sit in a circle and everybody shares, honestly, as long as you want. We’re not gonna give you a time limit. We give this four hours in our agenda because it is the first time they’re meeting and we are creating this safe, intentional, thoughtful place for people to go deep and start building bonds together so that we can go digging deep the rest of the year. And I feel like you only do that if you allow people to lay down their shields, their masks for a little bit. As politicians, we are so well practiced in showing up, you share a little bit of yourself and, and then it’s all work. We’re good at it, right? And in this space, can you just lay that down a little bit and come as your whole self? I’ve done this practice three times already and every single time there’s something new even for my own story that

comes through. I just feel like it sets the tone for what kind of fellowship this is so that people are prepared to come with their whole selves.”

Rituals like this, Sloan Perry says, “really is about storytelling and giving people lots of ways that can lower the level of risk, but still get at truth-telling about the subject at hand.”

Participants are encouraged to provide peer coaching to each other. On their own, participants even have created their own communications channel to check on each other, offer support and encouragement, stand in “loving accountability,” and share ideas and resources. Bencomo describes an elected official in a Southern state who received so much backlash for cussing on the legislature’s floor because of her anger at an issue, and her colleagues in this community of practice were able to support her in filtering the negative feedback and not feeling guilty about the incident.

Bencomo also knows first-hand what this community means to participants. She explains, “I’m in Las Cruces, New Mexico, in a pretty blue county, but also pretty rural and somewhat conservative and moderate, and I’m really progressive. And sometimes I feel crazy, like, oh my God, is this radical? Is my idea actually crazy? Are they right? And then I come into these [cohort] spaces and I’m like, wait a minute, no,



I'm not. There's just like this thread that gets built amongst us and it just feels less lonely."

She continues, "In 2017 we saw this huge surge of women running for office. Huge. And it was a reaction to this really awful thing [Trump's presidency], right? Recently, I've been wondering how many of those women are still in office. I have seen many women leave office because it's so lonely, because it's hard, because there's harassment, because it's not paid. So it's really difficult. For me, these spaces just helped me feel like a disruption. And it's a good thing. That's how we're trying to give people strength."

From a formal evaluation of the Future Presidents Project, constant feedback from participants was: "If I had known what it was, maybe I wouldn't have done it, but I didn't know how badly I needed it." Sloan Perry remembers one participant sharing with her—"point blank"—"I've been to six or seven training sessions for political leadership in my life. I've served in different roles and different offices. I've never been to a training like this. I think I learned more about how to lead for equity in the last two or three days by developing myself and healing my own stuff than I ever have."

The project is now contemplating starting an alumni network to build a broader community of practice beyond the yearly cohorts. Bencomo says, "We need more spaces like this where people stop feeling crazy for having these progressive, leftist ideas, which to me are a return to literal basic human rights. People feel bold when they feel like there are people behind them like they're not gonna be left alone. They can be a champion without feeling ostracized. That's what we're building, a network of these freely brave people who have each other's backs."

Another outgrowth of this community of practice is a consideration for a collective safety program for these women. Bencomo explains, "One of our participants has experienced so much violence she's traveling with a security detail. Another woman from my home state had her house literally shot at. It's everything from vile, racist emails to literal physical violence. It's all part of the same sickness. I think for us, the important part is how do we build a place for people to talk about it, to build connections with each other for that kind of community support? The big question is then, structurally, what does safety and security look like?"

In their partnership, Bencomo says Sloan Perry's coaching has made her a better facilitator. She says, "The type of leadership that Change Elemental believes in is just critical to the work that we're trying to do at Women's Democracy Lab." To Bencomo, whatever the next iteration looks like, Change Elemental is not a short-term contractor, but a long-term movement partner. She considers them to be "parts of the DNA of Women's Democracy Lab."



# 03

## 03. MOVING FORWARD

The RE practitioners and their clients in this report envision what the next level of racial equity organizational development looks like. First, there needs to be a more accurate description of this work, because harmful narratives about racial equity can breed cynicism and skepticism and question the effectiveness of this work, especially at a time when far-right oppositions cast aspersions on race-conscious practices, as the Supreme Court has done in its recent decision to gut affirmative action in college admissions. Second, racial equity capacity building has been refracted mostly through the lens of individual and organizational development. The RE practitioners in the REACH cohort believe that we need to think more aspirationally about how racial equity and racial justice need to be embedded in the broader movement ecosystem. Both require a deeper investment by the ecosystem, including funders, in this work. While the forces of white supremacy have been pushing back against the progressive gains, we need to push back harder, and more collectively. This is not a time for retreat but for reinforcements.

### 03.1 DOUBLING DOWN FOR RACIAL EQUITY WORK

As important and urgent as the work of racial equity organizational development is, there is not a dearth of funders to support it. This makes the investments of the REACH initiative both rare and necessary. The RE practitioners in the cohort advocate not only a deeper investment by funders in the REACH initiative but also an expansion of investments by the broader philanthropic community. Some practitioners also state that funders are an integral part of this racial equity landscape, not just supporters on the sidelines. Just as importantly, both practitioners and clients believe that funders, whether new or existing, should have a realistic understanding of what this work looks like because it often challenges conventional philanthropic assumptions about program design, outcomes, and sustainability.

People often think of this work as surgical and time-limited. But wellness—for a person or for an organization—is about deeper transformation that takes both time and scaffolded conversations. As Cynthia Silva Parker at Interaction Institute for Social Change says, “There are a lot of times when folks think what they need is a training. And what they really need is a disciplined facilitated process... It’s not just a ‘come teach us what race equity is and then voila, magic presto, we’re a different organization.” Anouska Bhattacharyya at YWCA Boston says she wouldn’t even conduct a requested training “before we’ve had some discovery conversations. We need to understand

where leadership is at. We need to understand how frontline workers are feeling. Folks are looking for a gold medal at the end of the race, rather than realizing it's a journey. Let's go further down the iceberg. Let's not just see what's manifesting above the surface. Let's look at patterns and behaviors." This work is not easily logic-modeled into going from increasing knowledge to modifying behavior. Melissa Meiris at Stepping Stone Consulting says, "If leaders are expected to help their organization rethink governance, rethink supervision, rewrite their HR policy handbook, and change compensation framework, all those things, to be more alignment with racial justice values, then that is a massive project and it requires a huge investment in time, funds, and a lot of energy, too."

Meiris brings up the inner alignment that many often skirt to get to programs and strategies. This alignment as a precondition to organizational transformation often takes many vulnerable conversations that only work if they are strategically scaffolded. Sometimes these conversations occur in affinity groups by positional power, by department, and by marginalized identities. Sometimes they occur in outside cohorts with other leaders—"because some of the stuff is really difficult to do inside a toxic environment," says Elissa Sloan Perry at Change Elemental—and the cohort participants might need support in diffusing what they have learned in their respective organization. Other times it takes individual coaching. Maybe by then, the entire staff is ready for a workshop that they now have buy-in for, or a small group is empowered to consider more concrete changes because now there is trust. Or some steps have to be retraced because there is a false start. Meiris recalls a client organization that started a racial equity committee that had a rocky beginning because "white staff didn't do any racial self-examination, so there was no foundation or grounding." In that case, it took

another six to eight months for the committee to develop a racial equity plan for the organization. The "consulting" is dynamic, emergent, relational, and in some ways, unknowable. One comment could unravel recent progress. But J. Miakoda Taylor at Fierce Allies also believes that broken trust is an opportunity to build a deeper trust. Or as Sloan Perry says, "We still have bad days where sometimes we show up poorly with each other. Hopefully, we know how to recover from that a little faster each time than we used to, and be in loving accountability with it, so that we don't get stuck."



Over and over again, RE practitioners tell us that this work takes time because it is relational, not transactional. Taylor says, "One of the biggest obstacles to this work is what I refer to as capitalist time. People want this to be quick. They want it to be over with. They want it to be a one-off because capitalist culture tells us that good things are quick and easy. They're done, check, check. But this work is not linear. It's iterative. It flies in the face of all things capitalist, linear, dichotomous, and in all the ways that we're conventionally trained."

Bhattacharyya agrees, "It's not something that



# Diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives face a sharp decline three years after death of George Floyd

+ Credit: Afro.com



+ Credit: Amy Elting, Afro.com

you can fix in a few years. Even if you do, you have to keep at it. Three years after the murder of George Floyd, some organizations are like, well, we tried that DEI stuff for three years. We got as far as we could, and now we're on to the next thing. But I think of racial equity and gender equity just like you would with your software and tech platforms. Just because you upgraded all of your laptops five years ago, you're not going to say, well, we don't need to do that again. We need to update our software. We have to make sure we're all using the platforms in the same way, that the language means the same to all of us, especially when new folks join us."

A few clients share how funders or leaders who have unrealistic expectations of outcomes by specified touchpoints could make it harder to grow together. As Lisa Donahue at Nature Connection Network (NCN) says, "Working relationally is often at odds with a timeframe." In her experience, moving too fast means someone gets left behind. Fatimah Ahmad says that the founder at DC Greens "raised serious money to invest in our [racial equity] work and that leadership buy-in does make a difference because this work is hard and expensive before

you see the result." Mark Liu at Grassroots Global Justice Alliance explains that this work sometimes requires you to do less external work (at least temporarily) in order to focus on internal dynamics. According to Liu, GGJ focused on "internal interpersonal dialogues and systems updates that would make their work more sustainable and our communication strong." He explains, "We did what we called the slow jam. We slowed all of our external work, paused it for a couple of months, to make space to be able to deal with it. Things are going to pop off and people are going to bring things up, and you have to be able to address them. A lot of times there's some kind of external thing we're trying to win or push, and we push the internal conflicts aside and don't come back to it. We were trying to reverse that kind of tendency." Similarly, as described in their case study, NCN also suspended their flagship event so that they could focus on the racial equity transformation without perpetuating more harm by doing the same thing.

Unrealistic expectations from funders and leaders about how involved this work is leads to under-resourcing for this work. Their

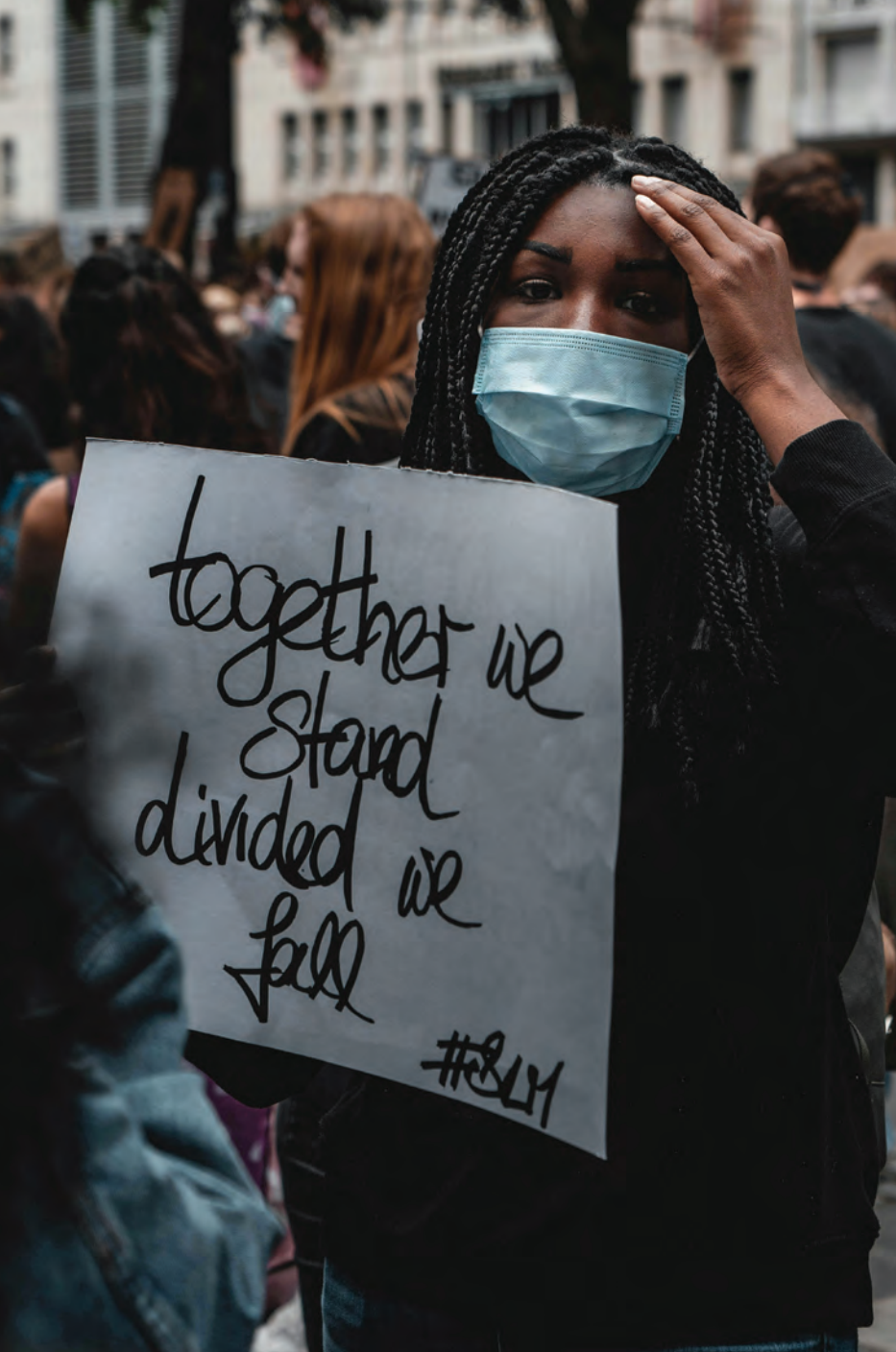


impatience ends up hurting the BIPOC staff (often Black women) who have been asked to lead the transformation most. There is an urgency to change these harmful narratives. RE practitioners cite recent mainstream media proclamations of the failures of DEI initiatives and state legislations banning the teaching of critical race theory as evidence of backlash. Some also predict that the Supreme Court's decision to outlaw affirmative action, even if strictly in the context of higher education admission, will have a chilling effect on nonprofits, especially those that receive public funding, to implement any race-conscious practices in human resources. As Cynthia Silva Parker at IISC says, "There's a public discourse that is undermining the work we're trying to do. This is actually very predictable. Systems resist change. So when there's a surge in one direction, there's gonna be a response to it. We've got to keep at it. John Lewis said something beautiful about freedom, that it is not some plateau that we climb up to and we get to rest. It is a continual process that every generation has to be engaged in to keep it, to maintain it, to advance it. There's a generation now of activists who are saying, look, we know it's a long haul. We gotta do this with joy. We got to do this in a way that we're not tearing our bodies apart and tearing each other apart."

The backlash, to practitioners like Silva Parker, is not a sign of failure, but an indication that their work is substantively challenging the status

quo. But RE practitioners also worry that funders might lose heart and decide to "chase the next thing" when this is the moment to increase their investment and not pull back. These practitioners envision a movement ecosystem that includes philanthropy as an essential and long-term partner. To do this, RE practitioners believe philanthropic foundations need to go through their own self-examination. "They need to see their part in the rupture," says Elissa Sloan Perry at Change Elemental. "They need to be ready to see the realness of the wound they have inflicted, or inflicted by the same system of extraction that created them." Tanya Pluth at the Center for Diversity and the Environment says, "There is a distorted sense of what accountability looks like and where it needs to be targeted." Derias says, "I would challenge the expectation that organizations are going to shift in one or two years. These are organizations that have been under-resourced and understaffed, for years, if not decades, of non-investment. And then being asked to shift so many things within a short amount of time? It's not how organizational change happens. It's a narrative that gets fueled by the ways funders fund, which is not multi-year contracts, not general operation support. It's the idea that these organizations are now going to magically transform both themselves and the field, and it's just not true." Some see recent developments like the [Decolonizing Wealth Project](#) or [Trust-Based Philanthropy](#) as positive steps in the right direction.





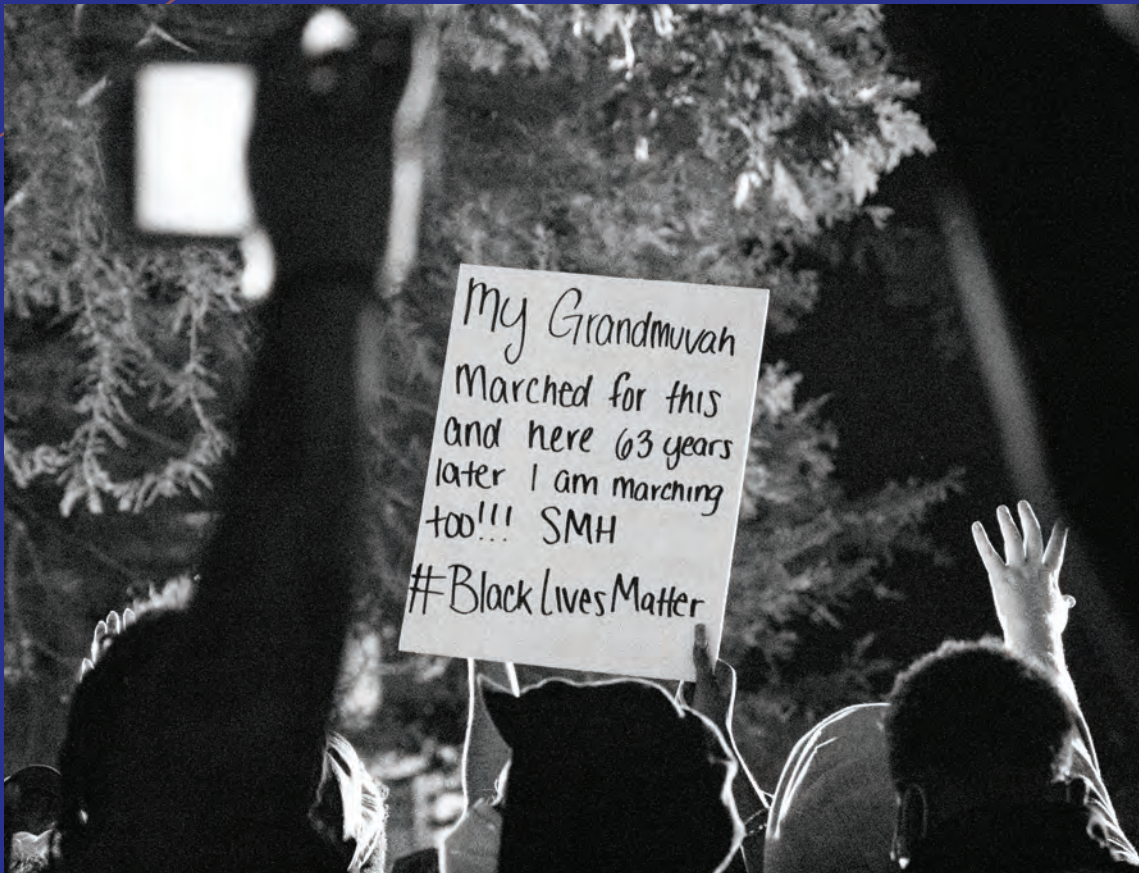
### 03.2 BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

While a lot of capacity building—racial equity or otherwise—focuses on individual leaders or organizations, RE practitioners express their commitment to the broader movement ecosystem or field building. As J. Miakoda Taylor at Fierce Allies says, “My consulting priority is equity and justice, not individuals and organizations.” More than one practitioner has said that one outcome of this work, especially with organizations that are not genuine about changing the power dynamics to be more

equitable, is that “the best people of color, now that they’ve tasted what speaking truth to power feels like, will leave.” To them, that is a “positive outcome” or “a step towards liberation.” Many of these practitioners work with cohorts or networks of leaders and organizations to cultivate relationships, share knowledge and ideas, diffuse learning, and scale innovations in the field. If changing an organization takes a long time, building a field is an even more gradual process.

Ecosystem thinking means not only relationships among nonprofit leaders but also RE practitioners as well. As the practitioners and clients have shown throughout this report, RE practitioners (and funders) are integral to the ecosystem, not bystanders. Clients consider them thought partners, capacity builders, facilitators of difficult conversations, spiritual advisors, and more. In fact, in some of the communities of practice that these RE practitioners are building, the boundaries between practitioners and clients are blurred. Many of the clients become co-facilitators, experimenters, and even consultants to other groups. The REACH Fund uniquely supports some of these communities of practices by RE practitioners, at a time when many other funders have not adopted this ecosystem lens. Like Mala Nagarajan says, “[REACH] basically gave us breathing room from the heavy demand of client projects to be able to expand the capacity building field by training other consultants and to create tools to support independent changemakers and practitioners in shifting their compensation to center racial equity.”

Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz at RoadMap Consulting suggests different revenue generation models to reflect this ecosystem thinking: “If you’re going to do holistic capacity building, you have to fund both the progressive, radical, BIPOC-led intermediaries that are doing this work and their clients to do deep, long-term sustainable capacity building work...And you have to fund intermediaries to collaborate.” Weiner-Mahfuz lists a “back office for multiple intermediaries” as an example of building a streamlined collaboration. Taylor also suggests a more



collaborative (and less competitive) way to fund this work by giving cohort members some decision-making on how to move collectively. They say, “We could be doing really radical work if we could interact with each other in a much more meaningful and intimate way.”

Other RE practitioners in the REACH cohort echo the need for a community of practice among themselves at this moment. Some see a “deep bench” of liberatory practices, most of which draw from decades of racial justice lineages and have iterated with each political condition, that can benefit from some mapping and collective sensemaking. Also, as the demands for racial equity consulting swell, many consultants enter the field without a progressive racial justice analysis. This “mainstreaming” has led to the diluting of some liberatory practices, like the conflation of self-care or protection from discomfort with healing justice, says one practitioner. Thinking of the history of cultural misappropriation, Taylor says, “These tools are powerful if they’re used well. But if people just start hacking them, and picking and choosing the aspects of what they want, it waters down

the tool, which is dangerous to both the tool and the lineage from which it comes.”

Recent media coverage about the ineffectiveness of DEI initiatives, for instance, says Silva Parker, has to do with the one-off approach (like sensitivity training) that is antithetical to the way all of the RE practitioners in the REACH cohort work. She says, “Those of us who practice this day in and day out have been saying that for 40 years. You [media] haven’t said anything new or helpful. We agree that those approaches aren’t helpful, and we need you and your readers to focus on and invest in what’s really needed to make and sustain change at the personal, interpersonal, and institutional levels.” Oversimplified criticisms like this could hamper and discredit genuine racial equity efforts. As the field continues to grow, it becomes imperative for those at the forefront in this field to be supported in articulating the tenets and approaches to this work.



# 04

## 04. CONCLUSION

As illustrated throughout this report, work towards racial justice and liberation is both complex *and* achievable. At its core, racial justice work is about catalyzing deep personal, interpersonal, cultural, and systemic transformations that ultimately enable all people—especially those most impacted by injustice—to thrive.



We hope that you are inspired by the wisdom and insights offered by each practitioner profiled in this report. The journeys shared here surface promising and tangible practices for organizations to implement as they move towards racial justice and liberation: the courage of critical conversations, the co-creation of brave spaces, and the traction of networked innovation. Importantly, these activities and practices must be

applied thoughtfully and responsibly, and over an extended period of time.

Many of us have experienced the harmful impacts of quick-fix, “DEI” approaches to racial justice without proper lineage, preparation, and ongoing commitment. Sustained, long term commitment to this work and the guidance of—and investment in—trusted racial equity practitioners is critical. This is especially true amidst mounting backlash and mischaracterization of racial equity efforts. This is precisely the time to expand the capacity of racial equity practitioners, refine our collective methods and approaches to this work, and reinforce our commitment to this work across the board.

**This report delivers a clear and urgent call to action for philanthropy: now is the time to both partner with and invest in racial equity practitioners.** Their cross-sector expertise is evident: a deep understanding of the collective challenges our sector faces; a birds eye view, which enhances their collective sense making capacity; and a rich reservoir of ancestral wisdom and practices, which offer effective and healing pathways to racial justice. Funders have an indispensable role to play in resourcing racial equity practitioners to facilitate lasting social change. We owe these leaders unrestricted, multi-year grants, and a long runway to foster networked communities of practice to dismantle the oppressive systems stifling our lives. But it is not sufficient to just resource this work - funders must live it too. The philanthropic sector must prioritize shifting its relationship with grantees from control to mutual accountability.

The journey towards liberation demands deep transformation and alignment at various levels—within ourselves, across nonprofit and philanthropic institutions, and across the broader movement ecosystem. The transformation we seek in the world begins in the spaces we shape



most: within ourselves, our relationships with one another, and the organizations we lead and serve. **This work requires us to both unearth and unlearn the deep conditioning of white supremacy and racial capitalism to build new models of leadership.** As we navigate this journey together, let us understand that mistakes are inevitable. We encourage you to approach the uncomfortable, challenging, and emotional moments with vulnerability, use them as opportunities to create greater alignment towards our shared vision, and, ultimately, strengthen our collective resolve.

In the end, the responsibility for profound shifts in mindsets, cultures, and systems does not fall upon individuals alone. True liberation will rely on collective healing and co-creation across sectors, regions, and movements. It will require recognition of our interdependence, and accountability to one another. For nonprofits and organizations across the movement ecosystem, the path forward must be one of innovation and openness to failure and change. We must embrace new ideas with courage and

creativity, and integrate racial equity principles into every facet of our operations, while actively participating in networked communities.

**May the stories and tactics outlined in this report nourish our courage, and our creativity on the journey towards justice. May we have the audacity to vision beyond constraints, as we imagine and build new patterns, models, and worlds, brick by brick. Our collective liberation depends on it now more than ever.**

