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## Liberatory Consciousness in Contested Space: How Nonprofit Leaders of Color Decolonize Their Minds and Change Everything

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Liberatory Consciousness in Contested Space: How Nonprofit Leaders of Color Decolonize  
Their Minds and Change Everything

by

Zuri Tau

Under the Direction of Deirdre Oakley, PhD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## ABSTRACT

Women of color leaders in the United States have a unique experience of being the "outsider-within" in their nonprofit organizations. Regardless of years of experience or education, leaders experience barriers to their thriving that have nothing to do with their ability to do the job. This qualitative dissertation argues that nonprofits are contested spaces where Black and brown women innovate to resist the institutional manifestations of the matrix of oppression. The research methodology included in-depth interviews of nine women of color who were deeply committed to social justice work and community impact. Seven of the nine women interviewed were or had been executive directors at large and mid-size national organizations. Their narratives provided a vivid picture of the challenges and resistance strategies that characterized their professional life and provided the data to expand existing feminist, critical race and organizational studies theory. The primary research questions include; How do institutions dominate/replicate the matrix of oppression? How does institutional domination intersect with the resistance and ingenuity of nonprofit leaders of color? What liberatory behaviors and mental processes do participants engage in to navigate nonprofit spaces? The findings chart the patterns of dominance in nonprofits and theorize the psycho-social mechanisms that lead to the emergence of a critical consciousness for marginalized leaders.

**INDEX WORDS:** Liberatory Consciousness, Oppositional Consciousness, Nonprofit Leadership, Liberatory Leadership, Matrix of Oppression, Institutional transformation

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2023

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May 2023

## DEDICATION

To my mother, the quintessential learner and spiritual diamond who reminds me that it is never too late to create a new life for yourself. I am because you are.

To my daughters who are most skillful at loving themselves and others and who have been waiting for me to finish so we can get back to having fun.

To my father who remains genuinely thrilled at my journey and who has encouraged me both to focus and to take time off.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Studies on the intersections of race and gender of the nonprofit sector have been scarce, and nonprofit research has been largely colorblind (Carson 1993). Charities have existed informally for centuries in the United States, often as a project of religious institutions (Grimm 2002; Risch 1936) and 501c3s have been around since 1969 (Powell and Bromley 2020). Yet it wasn't until the 1990s that the business and nonprofit world started to take the optics and benefits of diversity seriously and thus began examining hiring and pay disparities.

Call it hubris or naivete, but many in the sector were surprised that research in the mid-2010s still showed that nonprofit professionals of color were both promoted and paid less than their white counterparts, and that the largest nonprofits and foundations are the least likely to have a woman or person of color as the Executive Director or a board with race and gender diversity (Buteau 2019; Kunreuther and Thomas-Breitfeld, 2020). And now, any research conducted after 2020, explicitly or not, is being shaped by the tsunami of events ushered in with this new decade. A global pandemic has redefined work, school, and day-to-day social interaction. And in the United States, these changes became the backdrop for uprisings against police killings of unarmed black people that reopened the country's racial wounds. The tipping point for many was George Floyd's eight minute, forty-six second public execution. This murder, which was shared across the world, through social and traditional media, seized our collective consciousness, and after a summer of protests, nonprofit institutions and those who ran them began to reevaluate their approach to racial justice and equity.

The nonprofit world, despite its mission, is no less susceptible to replicating and incubating oppressive practices and cultures than society at large. The sector's narrative situates

foundations and formal institutions as saviors and allies to movements and activists working for social change- yet the money that sustains most nonprofits is donated and controlled by wealthy white elites who interests are in the continuation of an inequitable system that allowed them to get rich in the first place (Morgan-Montoya 2020) (Morey 2021). The Nonprofit Industrial Complex is an anathema to many grassroots leaders. And after the confluence of racial violence in 2020, when these institutions were called out for their oppressive practices, women and people of color in non-profit organizations were asked and expected to lead through this ‘crisis’ by doing additional intellectual and emotional labor to shepherd their organizations through policy overhauls, staff reckonings, cultural critiques, and every manner of diversity, equity, and inclusion process. It was as if the solution to our collective spiritual and emotional paralysis was forced action, yet ironically, these actions mirrored the imbalanced divisions of labor that were already embedded in the muscle memory of nonprofit spaces. Women and people of color in leadership or supporting roles bore the enormous responsibility for fixing organizational problems of which they were victims.

The complexity of being a person of color, post 2020, in these institutions cannot be overstated. Even in normal circumstances, leaders of color are strategizing how to overcome the social consequences of domination as a part of their job and identifying and calling out the oppressive and toxic behavior within their organizations, while also struggling to navigate the mental and spiritual effects of being discounted because of their identity (Burke, Cropper, and Harrison 2000; Ho 2017). Audre Lorde declared, “If our history has taught us anything, it is that action for change directed only against the external conditions of our oppressions is not enough.

In order to be whole, we must recognize the despair oppression plants within each of us”

(1984:79). I believe that the map for finding a way past these institutional and structural systems and overcoming the internal barriers to transformation has been created through the trial and error of leaders of color in nonprofits across this country. This dissertation explores the intricate processes by which nonprofit social justice leaders of color answer this call to wholeness; how they decolonize their minds, actions, and develop a liberatory, oppositional consciousness that empowers them to resist hegemonic social norms in contested institutional spaces. This research reveals how social justice leaders of color resist the despair Lorde speaks of while transforming themselves and sometimes their institutions.

This research was driven in part by my own experiences in the social justice non-profit sector. In 2013, after over a decade of evaluating prevention and public health projects in primarily white spaces, I began working with BOLD, Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity, a leadership development organization for Black activists and nonprofit leaders in the United States. Over time, I began to work with more groups who were led by or training leaders of color and women of color. My experiences within these groups revealed that unlike their white peers, they were regularly engaging in another dimension of labor because of their racial or gender identity, accent, or skin color. Institutional racism, sexism, microaggressions, and demeaning cultural stereotypes were all familiar challenges they encountered in their leadership roles within white-led institutions. They shared stories of dealing with racist office politics, being an outsider and insider, internalized oppression, and having to decide when to speak up about inequities they experienced or witnessed while simultaneously collaborating on initiatives for social change. Many of these leaders possessed what I am terming a *liberatory consciousness*. Liberatory consciousness describes a way of being when individuals recognize power

imbalances, injustice, and oppression and take action to decolonize their thoughts and behavior toward themselves and others, while embodying a politic that resists and transforms oppressive systems. Not merely a self-protection mechanism, it leads to an innovative, resourceful, and creative mindset that can actually create change.

This research contributes to the nonprofit studies and feminist theory in three ways: (1) it sharpens our sociological understanding of the meaning-making processes occurring within those who resist oppressive structures; (2) it expands and sharpen theories of the development of oppositional consciousness and resistance; and (3), it contributes to an understanding of the nonprofit sector as a contested space, where marginalized individuals struggle to resist hegemonic forces.

The dissertation is organized as follows: Chapter 1 is the introduction. In Chapter 2, I discuss the literature on inequity in the nonprofit sector, institutional transformation, domination in institutions, and oppositional consciousness. In Chapter 3, I discuss the applied theoretical frameworks. In Chapter 4, I review methods utilized for data collection and analysis, in Chapter 5, I discuss the study findings and theoretical implications, and in the final Chapter 6, I offer my research conclusions and thoughts for the field.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Inequity in the Nonprofit Sector**

Powell and Bromley argue that “Nonprofits exist because ideas and resources are mobilized and formalized by activists, volunteers, donors, and social entrepreneurs. These diverse elements are the forces that supply energy and ideas. In this sense, nonprofits exist as the medium for the expression of values and commitment” (2020). This sanguine definition doesn’t

bring attention to the industry's fascinating history and numerous influences that have shaped it over the last 40 years. Yes, people gravitate to structured ways to express their values and commitment through collective action, but many nonprofits are also in existence because powerful elites want to protect their ability to develop untaxed entities. Nonprofit organizations have become increasingly professionalized since the late '70s in parallel with the increase of funding from the government and foundations. These external funding sources have encouraged standardization and nonprofits have hired more professionals who can fulfill management roles and respond to greater calls for accountability and documentation of outcomes (Rathgeb Smith and Lipsky 1994). Nonprofit and leadership scholars have only recently begun to examine how race, gender and other dimensions of oppression operate within institutions. In the 1990's, as diversity and inclusion became mainstream concepts within corporate America, the nonprofit sector followed suit by increasing recruitment of women, Blacks and other people of color for leadership positions. Yet research on the experiences of People of Color (PoC) in leadership positions revealed that the institutions remain resistant to their voice and influence. The assumption that diversity would lead to positive outcomes was flawed; for it failed to account for the context in which these leaders of color would be operating (El Hadidy, Caicedo, and Ospina 2001) (Schenker and Perry, 2005). Hill Collins argues that patterns of privilege and marginalization correlate to a matrix of domination of various groups within broader society (1990:227). Because the oppression operates through interpersonal, structural, disciplinary, and hegemonic levels including social institutions, it should not be surprising that nonprofit spaces are not liberatory on account of their stated goals and purpose.

Nonprofit culture, like the majority of American institutional culture, is shaped by patriarchal and anti-black norms that validate and reinforce entrenched ways of working that

emphasize top-down authority and decision-making. Recent research by Building Movement Project (2019) included a survey of 5,000 nonprofit staff on their experiences of race and leadership in nonprofit settings. This research was predicated on the widely held assumption that the lack of leaders of color in the nonprofit sector was due to a disparity between the preparation and skills of white leaders versus those of people of color. Some of the most relevant findings include that respondents of color were more likely to report few opportunities for advancement (42% in 2019 and 45% in 2016); inadequate salaries (47% in 2019 and 51% in 2016); and lack of workplace support. Yet, these leaders possessed equal levels of education and experience as their white counterparts.

This research has emerged within the last decade but for at least 20 years prior, leadership programs for people of color have focused on training participants to be prepared for top leadership positions, with the assumption that they lacked the competencies and experience necessary to successfully manage organizations. In the last few years, programs such as The Power 50, The Women's Fellowship, and the Ford Foundation's BUILD program for new women of color executive directors, have taken a different approach by prioritizing curriculum that addresses internalized racism and sexism, healing, and navigating the effects of the myth of white supremacy within their organizations. These programs operate with the assumption that the institutions are flawed, and the leaders are stymied by manifestations of white normative culture, racism, and sexism. Nonprofit organizations are increasingly structured in ways that promote white supremacy culture. The elements of this culture include "perfectionism, sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, only one right way, paternalism, either/or thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, I'm the

only one, progress means it's bigger or more, objectivity, and the right to comfort"(Okun and Jones 2001). Black and brown people are not exempt from practicing these ways of being. What leaders have shared with me in the past, is that they struggle to exorcise these habits from their leadership practice. Naming these habits is often revelatory for leaders of color who felt resistance to these norms in practice but didn't have a frame of reference to describe the pattern of behaviors.

## **2.2 Institutional Transformation**

Research on how people of color transform institutions is mostly conducted within academia, primarily due to the emergence of third world and black feminist theory within the contested spaces of the university. Seventy six percent of US college faculty is white, 81% of tenured US professors are white and 66% are male (NCES, 2018). People of color who have leadership positions in the academy are aware of this inequity and have developed a myriad of techniques to resist and thrive in these settings. For example, in a study of Black academics and senior managers (Wright, et al., 2018), participants spoke to the many ways they confronted the contradictions of invisibility and visibility. Speaking up in meetings and specifically naming one's contributions, identifying allies and asking them to advocate for you, and thoroughly documenting incidents are some ways that Black, indigenous, and other people of color resist invisibility. Because their voices are usually underrepresented and undervalued in these settings, the maintenance of visibility becomes additional labor that these individuals take on. These activities are important because they "shape how [BIPOC] are valued and embraced in everyday practice" (Mirza, 2015).

Beyond everyday acts to move from margin to center, BIPOC leaders may employ more formal means to navigate institutional oppression. Joining or developing a union offers a

mechanism by which marginalized leaders can work to shift untenable conditions and gain protection from exploitative practices (Wright et al. 2018). Led by staff of color, employees at the Center for Community Change, a large nonprofit based in DC, developed a union in 2016 to address issues around compensation and work policies. A year later they listed several benefits of unionizing including: “a more supportive work environment and improved morale; a clear process for resolving disagreements and more collaboration with management; annual raises; layoff procedures and defined severance packages; and allowing employees to do outside work” (Nazarett, 2018). Strategies that rely on community can be highly structured or casual, but people of color also organize to build resilience not just to resist oppression. Professional and personal networks within and outside of organizations can provide emotional support and knowledge to assist others as they navigate institutional power relations. Lack of access to mentors is often a concern for leaders of color, especially women. “Decolonizing our taken-for-granted knowledges and entrenched ways of being inherent within our institutional walls requires not only deep self-reflection, but an intellectual and institutional safe space” (Mizra, 2015). These can look very different depending on the group makeup, but some examples include co-workers of color deciding to meet regularly outside of work to discuss micro-aggressions, feelings of exclusion and the challenges of oppressive spaces, as well as organization-sponsored affinity groups and professional associations. Informal communities such as the followers of Instagram pages @diversityinacademia or @notsoivorytower focus on increasing the visibility of common concerns and frustrations in academia. The blog [www.nonprofitaf.com/](http://www.nonprofitaf.com/) serves as a similar tool for nonprofits.

Institutional transformation in nonprofits, like universities, is ongoing critical work that is often deprioritized despite professed commitments to diversity and inclusion that Ahmed calls

“non-performatives” (Ahmed 2012). These types of practices are symbolic discourses that don’t result in the desired transformative action. She points to diversity statements as an example of discourse that is agreed upon by the institution but fail to produce the desired results (p 117). Institutions may also appear to be working toward equity by hiring a Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) consultant or requiring all-staff webinars on discrimination, for example. Leaders of color can feel encouraged by institutional commitments but may later experience them as hollow when those with institutional power point to them as evidence of change or support where there are no tangible impacts in the lives of marginalized leaders. Hooks (1995) encourages vigilance and cautions against Black people becoming too comfortable in settings where they are the minority. Unfortunately, the work to overcome domination in institutions is often put on those most impacted by it. The maintenance of visibility, vigilance to false claims of support, and community organizing are activities their white colleagues do not have to undertake to thrive within their institutional milieu. Some BIPOC leaders have chosen to leave white-led or majority white social justice organizations because of the additional labor and stress of navigating these issues. The argument for the importance of Black and BIPOC spaces is just as important as the argument for institutional transformation. In fact, participation in BIPOC affinity spaces or withdrawal from white spaces for a period of time may provide the psychosocial grounding that precludes BIPOC leaders’ acts of changing their institutions. The model of marronage, as conceived by Roberts (2017), emphasizes that what is evident or manifest in freedom doesn’t lie only in the act of retreat, but can also be present in efforts to transform a space into something from which one would not need to seek refuge.

### 2.3 Oppression and Domination in Institutions

Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996) conceptualize oppression as follows:

. . . oppression entails a state of asymmetric power relations characterized by domination, subordination, and resistance, where the dominating persons or groups exercise their power by restricting access to material resources and by implanting in the subordinated persons or groups fear or self-deprecating views about themselves . . . Oppression, then, is a series of asymmetric power relations between individuals, genders, classes, communities, nations, and states.

Therefore, “oppression is both a state and a process, with the state of oppression being an unequal group access to power and privilege, and the process of oppression being the ways in which inequality between groups is maintained” (David and Derthick 2020). Hill-Collins’ theory explains further that oppression is upheld through domination in order to uphold white hegemony, and that domination can be understood as a matrix (1990). Oppression and privilege are not randomly assigned, they are organized by social identity. The social identities of people are made up of characteristics such as ethnicity, race, gender, class, sexuality, citizenship and economic status. Certain identities are valued more than others and those who have privileged identities wield power over those who do not. Hill-Collins conceptualizes these social structures as a matrix that constitutes interrelated axes of social relations that organize oppression and privilege in all of our lives and maintain hegemony. Intersecting systems of oppression operate through multiple domains of power (2000, p 617). The *interpersonal domain*, which includes interpersonal relationships, ongoing interactions, and influences everyday life and is the primary site for conformity or transformation; the disciplinary domain that includes bureaucratic organizations whose task it is to maintain control and shape behavior through routinization, rationalization, and surveillance. The *structural domain* sets the overall organization of power relations within a matrix of domination such as law, politics, religion, and the economy. The *hegemonic domain* links to the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains by legitimizing

oppression in the form of ideology including the language we use, the images we respond to, the values we accept as universal, and ideas that we entertain (p 634).

Critical scholars have argued that institutions' primary purpose is to control people (Pallas 2016) (Fanon 1965) (Gramsci 1975) despite the usefulness of structures to organize resources and people for the accomplishment of a collective goal. By exploring oppression as a matrix of domination that operates in all aspects of life, we are able to understand how the experiences of leaders of color in nonprofit institutions are shaped by a hegemony that many choose to resist. Hegemony is reinforced in nonprofit institutions through the three domains; interpersonal, which can manifest for example through minimization of the contributions or achievements of leaders of color; disciplinary- which shows up as increased critique and scrutiny of BIPOC leaders' work and ideas, and structural- which is evidenced in disparities in pay between leaders of color and their white colleagues.

Research on domination within the interpersonal domain has surfaced common mechanisms for marginalizing people of color and women. Tokenization in professional spaces is the most well-studied mechanism and is important to this research because I am investigating BIPOC women's work experiences. The theory of tokenization was first written about in the 1970s by Rosabeth Moss Kanter who researched the experiences of white women executives in male dominated corporate environments. Her research argued that being a numerical minority created hyper-visibility and that that visibility positioned the token as representative of their groups' competency. The token also had to manage the perceptions and jealousy of colleagues in the majority to maintain positive relationships. This environment created performance anxiety and stress for the token (1977). In the last twenty years, researchers such as Jennifer Piece (1995), Christine Williams (1995), and Adia and John Harvey-Wingfield (2014), argued that

tokenization theory could be improved if understood through an intersectional lens. When they considered race and gender in addition to numerical ratios in professional settings, it became clear that being a hyper-visible token impacted women and men very differently, even if those individuals were of the same race and that white women's experiences were very different from Black women's experiences for example. Other tokenization research examines institutional practices, such as hiring leaders of color but not giving them the power to make decisions or using BIPOC leaders as a shield to avoid accusations of racism (Ho, 2017).

In the United States, hegemony is maintained at the expense of the poor, women, Blacks, gays and queer people, undocumented immigrants, indigenous people, and those who hold multiple marginalized identities for the benefit of the elite, white men and their allies (Hill Collins, 1991).

Within the nonprofit studies and organizational literature, there is a gap in the research on how leaders of color respond to and innovate within these contexts. While some literature has examined how marginalized leaders can help their organization address racial issues, it has made assumptions that institutions are open to these leaders' perspectives and actions (Fulton, Oyakawa, and Wood 2019). My research and the research of other critical scholars has found that leaders of color's ideas and institutional critiques are not often taken seriously and even when they are, they are still contested by individuals and systems that uphold longstanding organizational commitments to dominant cultural norms and oppressive practices (Ross 2022). Critical race theorists have defined this as "institutional racial paralysis," which explains that organizational inaction is due to "the complex and multifaceted stages of idleness and concealment (Wright Fields and Conyers 2021)." And others have argued that nonprofits are

racialized and gendered spaces that primarily serve the interests of white men (Nickels and Leach 2021). In this dissertation I am working from an analysis of these organizations as inherently contested space due to factors endemic to professional spaces and the unique history and culture of nonprofit organizations.

## **2.4 Oppositional Consciousness, Resistance and Resilience**

Social movement scholars Mansbridge and Morris edited *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest*, (2001) in which several social movement scholars examined the concept of oppositional consciousness, which Mansfield defined as “an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination”. The authors present a convincing argument that oppositional consciousness is developed through social engagement, for example, experiencing oppositional civic spaces, receiving political education, and/or participation in community-based resistance.

Mansbridge identifies four steps that an individual takes to become an agent of change. First, claim your previously subordinate identity as a positive; second, identify the injustices done to your group; third, demand social, political or economic changes to rectify those injustices; and fourth develop shared commitment (2001). Other social movement scholars (Lou 2012, Kwon, 2008, Negrón-Gonzales, 2013) have expanded on this nascent body of literature, exploring the meaning-making processes that influence the political engagement of marginalized groups. For example, Negrón-Gonzales’ ethnography of undocumented youth navigating their citizenship status and engagement in political community (2013) described the processes by which oppositional consciousness was developed through the public acts of political engagement and internal management of fear and shame. If it’s true that “the masters’ tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 1984:112), then to resist domination at any level, we must fashion

new implements or pick up those we have been convinced to discard. The challenge remains that even when we decide to create something new, our conceptualization of solutions is inexorably influenced by how we have been taught to think about ourselves and those who are in power. Ideological domination operates by “seducing, pressuring, or forcing” oppressed groups to trust and value white ways of knowing and being over their indigenous, community-based or cultural ideologies (Hill Collins 1991:89). It is the mechanism by which the dominant group makes the unjust social structure appear natural and permanent by reinforcing and valorizing its norms and position (p 44). Transforming out of this state requires decolonization of the mind and development of a liberatory consciousness. And as one transforms, so do they enliven their ability to operate from liberatory values and resist the seduction of familiar practices.

### CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the internal strategies and external strategies leaders of color enact to navigate, resist, and transform institutions, I will utilize three feminist frameworks that theorize the resistance and resilience/oppositional consciousness and institutional transformation.

Table 1 Theoretical Approach

<b>Oppositional Consciousness / Resistance and Resilience</b>		
<b>Institutional Transformation</b>		
Hill-Collins: Outsider Within & Matrix of Domination	Sandoval: Differential Consciousness	Anzaldúa: The Mestiza Way

Resilience practices within institutions	Methodologies of the oppressed	The facultad/faculty; Journey into the self
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Black and third world feminists have theorized the contours and intersections of political activity and internal transformation over the last 40 years (Lorde 1984, Anzaldua, 1987, Hill Collins 1991, 2000; Sandoval 2000; Lugones, 2003). Hill Collins and Sandoval, in particular, offer a deep analysis of the psycho-social mechanisms that lead to the emergence of a critical consciousness as well as the institutional implications of exercising the praxis of liberatory consciousness.

### 3.1 Sandoval: Differential Consciousness

In her tome, *Methodology of the Oppressed*<sup>1</sup> (2000), Sandoval theorized the development of *differential consciousness* as an alchemy of experiences, both personal and professional that result in a perspective that is critical of the status quo, particularly unequal social relations and oppression of those who are marginalized based on race, gender, sex, class, or nationality (p140). Sandoval argues that there are five technologies that comprise the methodology of the oppressed which one can utilize to resist and overcome ideological oppression (p147) and she emphasizes that these technologies are fostered in relationship with other oppressed people. The first is *semiotics*- the practice of seeing “objects-in-culture” as tools of ideological domination, e.g. local news reports that consistently air stories of violence in Black communities while ignoring white violence and erasing Black contributions to civil society. In an institutional setting this may look like policies that privilege resources for certain activities (professional or academic

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<sup>1</sup> A nod to Friere’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

conferences vs. wellness expenses or nontraditional therapies). Second is *deconstruction*, the process of stripping cultural signifiers down to their parts, e.g. when beauty products for white hair are labeled “normal”, “normal” and “white” are often associated. Third is *meta-ideologizing*, a process that appropriates “dominant ideological forms and uses them whole in order to transform them,” e.g. a tenured professor who uses their access to publication to speak out against pay gaps in academia. Fourth is *differential movement*, a state of flexibility on which practitioners depend on to engage in the first three technologies as needed, for example, social justice leaders who work to rewrite company policies and language that reinforce gender norms while asking HR to create requirements for the company to contribute flex funds to caregivers. Some of the leaders that I have interacted with over the years have mastered this flexibility- they know how to get what they need while pushing boundaries (Murphy (Tau) 2020) . These efforts are not always successful, and often BIPOC leaders are labeled as difficult or disruptive. The last technology is democratics: “*commitment and action* to effect political change for the purpose of social justice and redistribution of power”. The nonprofit leaders in my sample are actively working toward this purpose in their professional capacities, but this research will contribute to our understanding of how they advocate to social justice for themselves and their colleagues within their organizations.

### **3.2 Hill Collins: The Outsider Within**

In “Learning from the Outsider Within” and *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Patricia Hill Collins describes the Black woman intellectual who, though marginalized by dominant culture, has developed strategies to thrive and resist it. She identifies six practices that they employ to reject internalized, psychological oppression while working for institutional change (1986). The first practice is self-definition, which Hill Collins describes as challenging the

“knowledge-validation process” that produces prevailing narratives that demean and limit one’s identity. Negative images or prevailing stereotypes of Black and brown people shape how knowledge and truth are deemed legitimate. These validation processes are present in decision-making, management practices, and day-to-day interactions. When one benefits from these practices they may receive supervisory attention or acknowledgement, freedom to implement their ideas or programs uncontested, more autonomy to make decisions, or access to and control of large budgets and grant funds. BIPOC are often denied this validation and fight for it while constructing and sharing oppositional knowledges informed by their lived experience, other sources of truth, and positive reframing of their cultures and histories.

The second practice is self-valuation. When engaging in self-valuation, one appreciates the elements of their culture and character that prevailing narratives devalue. For example, within some nonprofit spaces, prominent displays of non-white culture such as art depicting people of color, colorful patterns, etc. are often discouraged. Black and brown leaders in these spaces understand that prevailing narratives label activities they consider normal as “unprofessional”, such as loud talking, personal sharing, or using slang or African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Research has found that people of color who are comfortable in their cultural, racial, and ethnic identities and who regularly draw on their history as a source of inspiration are more successful in their practice of resistance strategies (Yosso and Lopez 2012).

Third is the critique of the dichotomous structuring of reality and embracing the intersectional nature of oppressions. Hill-Collins and other feminist and critical race scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Crenshaw 1991), bell hooks (hooks 2000:87), Frances Beale (2008) and the Combahee River Collective (1977), for example, argue that understanding the complexity of social relations must go beyond singular

understandings of identity or either/or representations of how power operates in our society. Intersectional theory is in direct opposition to widely accepted dichotomous thinking. This thinking limits creative problem solving and deludes us into simplified explanations of oppression e.g., men oppress women therefore women are always the oppressed, Blacks are less valuable than whites, therefore Blacks will always have less power than whites, etc. Critique of this ideology is not easy nor is it intrinsic for the marginalized people who have internalized these ways of thinking. Leaders of color including Black feminist founders within the Movement for Black Lives, such as Charlene Carruthers of BYP100 and Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi of Black Lives Matter, credit a Black Feminist lens as a primary tool for devising strategies that solve for the insidious, institutional, and systematic oppressions Black people face (BYP100, 2019; Craven, 2017).

Another resistance strategy is the involvement in safe cultural spaces that “provide the ideological frame of reference—namely, the symbols and values of self-definition and self-valuation that assist Black women in seeing the circumstances shaping race, class, and gender oppression”. This research seeks to better understand the ideological frames of reference the leaders find useful as they develop a liberatory consciousness. Hill-Collins highlights “cultural spaces” as incubators for these frames of reference. Studies of Black space, affinity spaces and marronage have emphasized the importance of retreat to settings where healing, unlearning, and survival become possible away from the white gaze (Watts-Jones 2002) (Andrew Dilts 2017). Among other things, these spaces make it possible for BIPOC leaders to undo the habits of internalized racism. The dissertation research explored the extent to which WOC nonprofit leaders nurture and depend on these spaces and what other resources provide counter narratives to oppressive institution culture. I have observed women of color participating and creating these

spaces pre and post COVID. For example, alumni from the Power 50 Nonprofit Women of Color Leadership Development program maintain group texts on WhatsApp to share life updates and political strategy as well as to provide emotional support. Due to limited in-person involvement in safe spaces, virtual spaces such as the group chat have emerged as a meaningful alternative (Kelly 2018).

The fifth practice is creativity and self-expression, such as writing, creating art, and tending to plants. These activities allow us to resist objectification and the limitations put on us in institutional spaces. Many leaders of color maintain public-facing social media while posting on private pages where they share pictures of family vacations, indulge in interior decorating, or post about a new plant baby. These activities are often outside of the work setting and are essential to resistance because activism and laboring in contested spaces is draining.

Lastly, the final outsider-within resistance practice is working for institutional transformations and elevating the outsider-within viewpoint. As mentioned previously, institutional transformation is thoroughly documented in the academic sector but there is less research about institutional transformation of nonprofit organizations. Hill-Collins' outsider-within archetype is often a Black woman in academia, however she writes of activists and other leaders who, as Anzaldúa (1987) and Sandoval (2000) explain, actively resist the matrix of oppression from a position that contains elements of privilege. This framework provides a starting point to understand the practices leaders of color engage in to resist domination and thrive.

### **3.4 Anzaldúa: The Mestiza Way**

Anzaldúa (1987:15) speaks of the *mestiza*- who holds a similar position held by the outsider-within, one who lives on the borders of nations, cultures, and identities; who through

her unique positionality has a *facultad/faculty* that allows her to deconstruct the lies and misperceptions of oppressive cultures. Anzaldúa argues that the struggle is internal yet “is played out in the outer terrains... awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society” (p 87). In the chapter “The Mestiza Way,” she describes a woman who is going on an archetypal journey into the self. Anzaldúa is particularly skilled at mapping the internal terrain and offers a set of experiences that one may have when shifting ones consciousness. She describes the “struggle of borders” and “tolerance for ambiguity” as precursors to embracing the mestiza way (p 78-79). The struggle of borders occurs when one tussles with the conflicts that result from living and operating in a dominant culture which challenges or demeans one’s other cultural moorings. She uses the example of her internal conflict of her Mexican culture in opposition to the European culture which are both in opposition with the indigenous parts of herself and argues that those who desire to liberate their consciousness will have to first recognize these conflicts and the internal split of loyalty across cultural borderlands- and then decide to abandon dominant culture or perhaps create something new altogether. The tolerance for ambiguity is a reaction to this border conflict and is a psychological adaptation. This coping mechanism allows one to exercise mental flexibility in response to integrating the various ways of understanding the world promoted by these cultures. However, she argues that a lifetime of straddling borders while trying to resist oppressive ideas is ultimately ineffective and the very oppressor that we hope to resist is thriving “through entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within” (p 79).

The first step on the mestiza way begins with taking inventory of one’s ancestral toolkit, identifying the hurts and gifts passed down through lineage. Second, is an assessment and

critique of oppressions and traditions: “Putting history through a sieve, winnow out the lies, look at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been a part of. This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions” (p 82). Next, she documents this departure from all she knows and communicates this shift to others. Fourth, “she reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths,” and lastly, she embraces uncertainty and discomfort with the realm of ambiguity. Anzaldua, like Hill Collins, argues that the process of liberating one’s consciousness and identifying with a non-oppressive cultural foundation catalyzes internal power. The mestiza and outsider within master the ability to exist at and beyond the borders of dominant white culture and their indigenous cultures. The aforementioned decolonial and feminist theories of oppositional and critical consciousness offer useful frameworks of the phases of development and outcomes for leaders of color who seek to decolonize their minds and live and work in liberatory ways.

This research was conducted in the shadow of Freedom summer 2020, when people from all backgrounds cried, marched, prayed, and demanded racial equality for Black people. Foundations made multi-million-dollar investments into community-based organizations and many of us were reminded how far this nation has to go to respect and protect Black life. Nonprofit organizations are being elevated at this moment, both as mechanisms to help us change material circumstances for marginalized communities and as conduits by which powerful people can direct their resources to those most impacted. If the sector is not critical about the shortcomings of nonprofit structures and culture, it will continue to replicate the injustices it is seeking to undo. I am arguing that the best way to understand and in turn eradicate those inequalities is to learn from those who are most impacted by them. The BIPOC leaders who

contributed to this study have provided direction for what institutions can do to change their practices and be what our country needs them to be.

## **CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Overview**

This project investigated the experiences of women of color leaders in nonprofit institutions. Qualitative data methods are often utilized to prove theory and assess the validity of knowledge claims with empirical data. Within Western academia, qualitative studies have been criticized as less valid than quantitative research based on enduring positivistic and Eurocentric limitations of what constitutes valid epistemology. Eurocentric research paradigms assume that truth claims made by social scientists are based on quantifiable, observable, and measurable variables (Denzin, Smith, and Sessions Lincoln 2008). Post-colonial indigenous paradigms focus on methodologies that are culturally relevant to the group under study and take into account that the human experience can also be validated through non-experimental means including case study, observation and in-depth interviewing (Smith 2013). Postcolonial indigenous methodology as “including methodologies informed by the worldviews and ways of knowing of the colonized Other” (Chilisa 2020). In addition to utilizing alternative methodologies, the theoretical framework for the project is sourced from Black feminist thought, an established but often marginalized perspective on social power relations that will be used to interpret the experiences of the study participants.

My approach to this work is of a liberatory researcher informed by postcolonial indigenous research methodologies (Bagele Chilisa 2020; Wilson 2008) and social justice inquiry

(Charmaz, Thornberg, and Keane 2017). Being a liberatory researcher means that I completed this dissertation using practices and methodology that resist traditional power structures and privileged epistemologies in the design, implementation, and analysis stages of the project. In other words, I utilized a critical perspective (Cannella and Lincoln 2009).

Being a liberatory researcher means problematizing my role as the unbiased authority/expert and instead taking a reflexive position in relationship to those who provided the data for the study. My initial ideas and hypotheses were shaped and advanced by the participants throughout the process, which will be discussed in the chapter on research findings. Sociological research, including analysis and interpretation should be validated by the knowledge of those who are living the phenomenon we are studying. And in this position, I acknowledge that my work is not separate from my biography of a university educated Black woman who has worked within and been contracted by nonprofit organizations since 2004 (Lumsden, Bradford, and Goode 2019).

The research questions for this study arose from my experiences working with nonprofit leaders of color as a program evaluator. I observed many sessions where these leaders expressed the dissonance they felt between their abilities and the lack of receptiveness for their ideas and insights within their organizations. Leaders also felt at odds with nonprofit institutions that mimicked exploitative, racist, white dominant culture while professing equity-based values to the community. These concerns were often only discussed among themselves and when they spoke up to administration, these feelings were either met with resistance or indifference. It's no secret among nonprofit leaders of color that organizations before and after 2020 struggle to examine how oppressive practices are embedded in their culture and operations.

The interview questions<sup>2</sup> are designed to gather data on the following research questions based on my theoretical typology:

1. How does institutional domination intersect with the resistance and ingenuity of nonprofit leaders of color?
2. What liberatory behaviors and mental processes do participants engage in to navigate institutional spaces, specifically nonprofit organizations; and
3. How do these leaders transform, struggle, and thrive in these contested spaces?

The goals of the interviews are to:

1. Understand how leaders define their experiences in the context of nonprofit institutions that are not liberatory spaces;
2. Identify indicators of development of a liberatory consciousness;
3. Understand the interplay between a leaders' internal development and their external leadership actions and efforts to achieve social justice.

I also collected documents post-interview that provided examples of the institutional challenges that participants face in their workplace as well as their efforts to navigate or transform them.

The advantage of using semi-structured in-depth interviewing, as opposed to a survey or questionnaire, is that open dialogue provides a broader landscape to explore questions about complex experience. This approach allows the researcher the flexibility to inquire deeper when vague or opaque statements are expressed and reflect on what was heard for clarity of concept. This process also builds a rapport as the interview progresses. And as trust is established, so does the possibility for rich data (Henery 2017). Leaders of this caliber are often interviewed about their campaign wins and asked to present about their programs or may have participated in

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for interview questions.

studies about race and nonprofit leadership such as the Race to Lead survey by Building Movement Project (2017). This study and many studies into nonprofit diversity are usually concerned with inclusion and representation and academic studies of nonprofit leadership that center people of color are severely lacking. This research fills a gap in the literature while also providing a rare opportunity for leaders to reflect on what they've overcome and the strategies they have enacted to navigate and succeed in their professional life.

## **4.2 Data Collection**

This study utilized in depth interviews to answer the research questions. The interviews were semi-structured and 60 to 90 minutes in length. The list of in-depth interview questions is included in the Appendix, however, not all of these questions were asked in every interview. All interviews were conducted and recorded on the Zoom platform. A password was required to access the call room and QuickTime player was used as a backup to record the audio.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, working remotely and talking to people through a screen has become commonplace, however, these interviews were very rich and often went over the allotted time. One leader asked to have a follow up interview and we spoke over three hours in total. I also requested that participants submit supporting documents<sup>3</sup> (whatever they deemed appropriate), to provide examples of how they navigated oppressive practices or policies, shift organizational behavior, or advocated for themselves or others. However only two interviewees provided deidentified documents from their former or current places of employment. Having more data would have been preferable, however after reviewing the documents (letters that

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<sup>3</sup> I instructed the interviewees to anonymize these documents before sending them to me. The ethical considerations of this methodology are discussed later in this chapter.

Lauren sent to her former staff and supervisors and a power-point on supporting BIPOC women in leadership), I don't think there was a significant impact on the findings since those who shared these documents also discussed them in their interviews

The criteria for inclusion in the study was: (1) the participants hold or have formerly held leadership positions in established nonprofits that have a mission to benefit marginalized people, disenfranchised individuals and populations, including women, LGBTQ people, Black, indigenous, and other people of color; (2) I am defining an established nonprofit as an organization with 501c3 tax status that is at least 5 years old; (3) Since 66 percent of nonprofits, including charities, hospitals, religious organizations, education and arts institutions, as well as social justice organizations, have an annual budget of less than 1 million dollars and 80% have a budget less than 5 million, the leaders included in the study typically work at these types of organizations (Frailey 2017); (4) if the leaders' organization meets the above criteria, they also must identify as a person of color. To clarify, it is important to note that this sample was not meant to be representative of all women of color leaders in nonprofit settings. What this targeted qualitative approach provides is deep insight into the particular context of nonprofit institutions and the established phenomenon of marginalization of leaders of color in the nonprofit sector (Building Movement Project, 2019).

Study participants from diverse issue areas were recruited from across the country. These areas include environmental justice, racial justice, housing advocacy, economic justice, and international development. Initially, I compiled a list of 20 leaders from various nonprofit organizations who I thought would be excellent candidates for participation. After contacting some leaders, they made referrals to other leaders who contacted me and were interested in participating in the study. I emailed leaders that I have met through my work to ask if they would

be interested in participating in the study. I also reached out to a consultant that runs a foundation program for women of color executive directors to request if she would share my dissertation research request with them. The participants are a combination of these methods of outreach. I conducted 13 interviews with ten women, who all currently or previously held leadership in established US-based nonprofits and identified as a person of color. The leaders who were interviewed for this study were all women of color, highly experienced, and deeply committed to social justice work and to having an impact on their communities. Seven leaders were Black women, two were Latinx women, and one was a Middle Eastern woman. Seven of the nine women interviewed had been executive directors, five were currently working as executive directors. Two held leadership positions in international nonprofits, six held leadership positions in national organizations with multiple affiliates. Eight out of 10 respondents were over 40.

After the interviews, participants were offered a copy of their audio and for those who requested it, a transcript was provided upon completion. This added step was rooted in a liberatory approach to research that considers how the leaders can benefit from contributing to the study. In my experience, some interview participants like to have access to their interview data to use as a catalyst for further reflection or to write about their own experiences. And after several interviews, the leaders shared that the conversation had been useful. A few emailed me to share that they enjoyed considering questions that they had never been asked and reflecting on their life and leadership journey. As mentioned earlier, the interviews were semi-structured and 60 to 90 minutes in length. There were three interview questions that provided the most in depth responses:

1. People of color can often describe the moment when they realize that they're different- or separate from whiteness. Have you experienced a similar moment where you understood that your leadership was received differently than white leadership?
2. How do you/did you navigate the complexity of being a leader of color in the nonprofit context?
3. What practices have allowed you to thrive in institutional spaces?

### **4.3 Data Analysis**

The audio files were transcribed from audio to text for analysis and I utilized MaxQDA, a qualitative coding software to code the interviews. My research approach builds upon established concepts<sup>4</sup>, and it was important to identify if and how these concepts were supported or challenged by interview data. I conducted the analysis using a directed approach versus a conventional approach. In a conventional coding approach, the codes are sourced solely from the data and are defined during the analysis. For example, if I'm studying the impact of a new ice cream shop on neighborhood residents, the analysis could produce coding categories from any of their responses- from the quality of the mint chocolate chip to the rise in commercial rent in the area. In directed content analysis, codes are not only derived from the collected data but are also sourced from relevant theory and research. So, in this example, an urban sociologist's ice cream analysis would start with codes related to gentrification research. In this study of the development of liberatory consciousness in social justice leaders, I utilized Sandoval's five technologies and Hill Collins' six outsider-insider practices as codes (for a full description see

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<sup>4</sup> Grounded theory is often utilized in sociological research; however this study is not seeking to develop new theory. The purpose of this study is to build upon established theory by examining its applicability to nonprofit leaders of color in the 21st century nonprofit setting.

the theoretical framework section). I also developed new codes from the data during analysis of the interviews. This approach allowed me to test theory while building it (Deterding and Waters 2018).

*Table 2 Coding Schematic*

<b>Directed approach</b>	<b>Descriptive coding</b>	<b>Process coding</b>
Hill Collins' six outsider-insider practices  Sandoval's five technologies  Anzaldúa's Mestiza Way	Coding notable themes from the data in the researcher's words	Coding specific activities that are repeated in the data

While the coding approach explains how I sourced my codes, qualitative data analysis also provides several options for naming or identifying themes or notable components of data (Saldana 2016). I utilized descriptive coding as a foundation for interpretation and analysis. When I saw repeated stories in the data, these were developed into codes that I utilized to build a case for particular phenomenon. I coded these phenomena in my own words, e.g., #2 phenomenon or expectation of patience. For example, many of my interviewees shared stories about barriers and support from other staff of color. This led to a new code of internalized oppression that was not sourced from the theoretical frameworks. I decided against in vivo coding because it uses direct quotes from the section of text to describe the expressed sentiment. The weakness in this approach is that people use different words to express the same idea.

Creating codes that can apply to multiple snippets of data across interviewees aided in developing themes early in my analysis and contributed to my theory building further into the process.

To understand what was happening within the leaders (emotions, thoughts, feelings), how that related to their actions in their workplace (leadership, creativity, resistance, resilience), and if those actions support or challenge our theoretical understanding of how they navigate their outsider-within position in powerful institutions, I utilized pattern coding. Pattern coding encourages the identification of repetition in the transcripts. This was particularly helpful to examine how Hill-Collins and Sandoval's theories were borne out by empirical data.

#### **4.4 Ethical Considerations**

Protecting the wellbeing of participants and minimizing harm is a critical step to designing a qualitative research project. The strategy for recruitment ensured there was informed consent before participation. In the study participation request, the project was described in detail and the consent form included the steps for ensuring confidentiality in writing and what protocols were in place to maintain this confidentiality. To protect the participants' identity, in the following chapters, when quoting, I use pseudonyms to identify interviewees instead of their real names. I categorized their organizations using a typology that includes organization size (small, mid-sized, large) and structure (foundation, membership organization, intermediary, training, mobilization/organizing, advocacy). For example, I may describe an interviewee as: "Rilene (alias) who is an executive director (position) at a large advocacy organization (size & structure)." All participants know their alias so they can identify themselves in the dissertation narrative.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

I was one of those people that was never awarded by institutions, you know? I started out as a community organizer and did real community organizing, like door-to-door, getting people signed up to vote, and organizing against our local supermarket, because I've always lived in black spaces. I've always grown up in black communities. So when I actually went to go work in an institution, because that's what somebody told me that was the way that I could have more impact, I was an outsider but becoming an insider, I never fit in. (Simone, executive director of a large economic justice national nonprofit)

I thought that the nonprofit was going to help us but we realized that they didn't really believe it was possible to do what we wanted we wanted to do. And they didn't only underestimate us because we were undocumented, they underestimated us because we were young. So, we decided to start our own organization. (Justice, Co-founder of a mid-size national immigrant rights nonprofit)

The leaders in this study shared compelling stories of fighting for justice while working within and outside of institutions. Leaders like Justice started their own organizations and others like Simone, now operate at the highest levels after years of disappointment and struggle in nonprofits. The data analysis of these interviews provided findings that answer the primary research questions and reveal a side of charitable institutions that we rarely see. These institutions include a range of organizations including small grassroots groups, major philanthropic institutions, advocacy organizations, established charities, unions, and social justice organizations. There are over 1.5 million federally recognized 501c3s in the United States (Candid 2022). Being a nonprofit in this country primarily means receiving tax exemption on monies that are granted and earned by an institution. Colloquially, a nonprofit is thought of as an organization whose primary purpose is to work for a social good as opposed to a for-profit organization whose primary mission is to make money. The Matrix of Oppression theory (Hill-Collins 2000) explains that hegemony, the way power is structured, allocated, and controlled in our society, operations within several domains or levels of life including the structural,

disciplinary and interpersonal. The structural domain organizes oppression by defining the boundaries of power relations and norms among groups of people. For example, religion, politics, and economic institutions can be considered structural. The disciplinary domain includes institutions that enforce and propagate these social norms while maintaining oppression for some and privilege for others. These institutions shape and control behavior on a societal level. The criminal justice system and the educational system are primary examples of this. The interpersonal domain manifests most viscerally in our everyday life and is where the interviewees accessed and recognized power dynamics as well as acted to shift these dynamics. Despite nonprofits often being viewed as organizations that are more committed to or capable of practicing equity, just like any other institution in the United States, nonprofits are situated to operate within the matrix of oppression, and without active resistance, will reinforce hegemony as a natural result of its structure.

In this chapter I will discuss new phenomenon and theory related to the following research questions:

1. How do institutions dominate/replicate the matrix of oppression?
2. How does institutional domination intersect with the resistance and ingenuity of nonprofit leaders of color?
3. What liberatory behaviors and mental processes do participants engage in to navigate nonprofit spaces?

The leaders who were interviewed for this study described several types of organizational barriers to their leadership within nonprofits. I will discuss the organizational barriers and nonprofit cultural phenomenon that I identified through analysis of the interviews:

These barriers include questioning legitimacy, tokenization, internalized racism, and role binding. The phenomenon include: the fairy godmother phenomenon, the voice phenomenon, and the #2 Phenomenon.

*Table 3 Categorization of research findings*

<b>Barriers to BIPOC Leadership in Contested Space</b>						
Questioning Legitimacy	Tokenization	Internalized Racism	Role Binding	<b>Nonprofit Cultural Phenomena</b>		
				The Voice Phenomenon	The #2 Phenomenon	The Fairy Godmother Phenomenon
Resistance from colleagues to deem a BIPOC leader as worthy of positional power within an organization	When BIPOC leaders are marginalized within the positions and denied true influence due to their outsider within status	When BIPOC leaders adopt oppressive beliefs and practices toward themselves and others who share their identity	Keeping BIPOC leaders in limited positions that reduce their organizational power and authority	When BIPOC leaders are expected to be a buffer for white leadership and to serve as a go between for staff of color	Viewing BIPOC women leaders as best fit for support roles instead of top leadership roles such as executive directors.	BIPOC women leaders' ethnicity and /or race provides innate abilities to transform organizations

This study is primarily concerned with how leaders responded to these conditions, not in exhaustively charting the endless manifestations of institutional barriers; however defining these obstacles illustrates how the Matrix of Oppression operates in contested institutional spaces. I argue that nonprofits are not inherently safe or equitable spaces for Black, indigenous, and people of color; they are contested spaces- where individual and organizational norms and ideologies intersect and conflict and power is wielded to either maintain or disrupt the status quo.

## 5.1 Theme I - Legitimacy

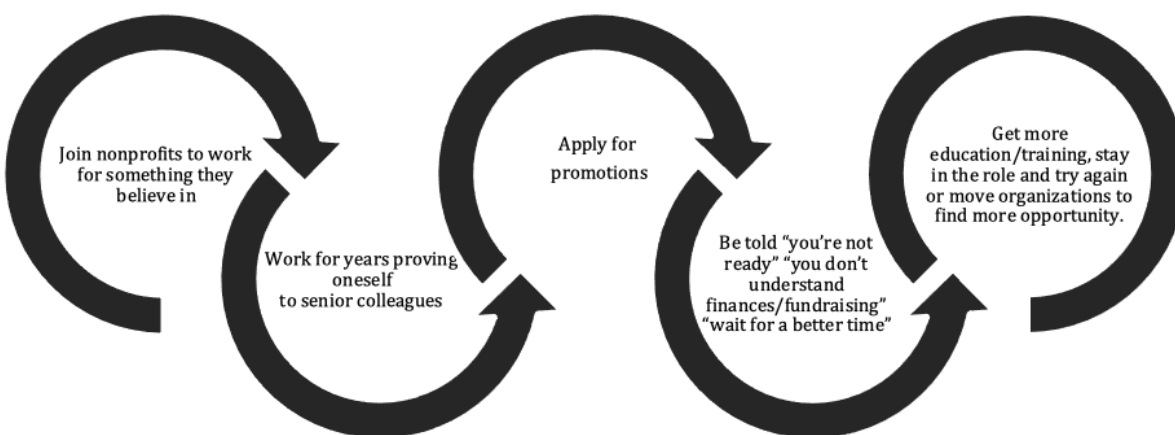
Legitimacy, as my colleagues and I define it, is the operational credibility and authority a leader holds in an organization. Institutional legitimacy is a function of three elements (Post, Tau, Barsoum, Dixon 2019):

1. One's lived experience (e.g. identity, communities of origin, school/ work history) – and its influence on motivation and leadership orientation;
2. The skills, resources and approaches a leader adopts for navigating organizational opportunities, challenges, and interpersonal dynamics;
3. Others' (e.g. supervisors, colleagues, funders) perceptions of a leader's influence, credibility, and power as a valid indicator of the extent to which the leader holds legitimacy.

If we revisit the matrix of oppression, it follows theoretical logic that women, people of color and those who hold intersecting marginalized identities will have their leadership questioned within institutions. The leaders in this study described various instances of their influence being stunted, of being relegated to positions below their experience and education, and failures of their organizations to credit or resource them. Post and Dixon (2019) have argued that leaders in nonprofits are aware of these overt and implicit patterns and develop strategies to gain credibility and find levers for influence that allow them to reach their goals. However, these methods are not always effective because of the limitations of organizational culture, i.e., most of the interviewees had left at least one organization due to never being able to gain credibility.

One way that legitimacy issues showed up most clearly for the interviewees was in promotions and internal resourcing for leaders' ideas. The first interview question was "Please tell me about your journey to leadership: What are some of the tipping points or catalysts that have led you to

where you are today? Most of the leaders described this professional arc:



*Figure 1 BIPOC Leaders' Nonprofit Professional Arc*

Black and brown leaders learn that their legitimacy will be questioned in large and small ways. Asa, a Black woman who is an executive director of a large national advocacy nonprofit shared a complex story of experiencing the challenges of advancement in an organization she had worked in for over a decade. After taking on increasing organizational responsibility over time, she earned the trust of her supervisors and team. The white leadership who had been in place for decades were not really interested in managing, and those conditions provided the space for her to push forward her ideas and galvanize her colleagues. When the results of an equity assessment showed that the staff wanted more people of color in leadership and subsequently the executive director decided to move on, her friends and colleagues encouraged Asa to apply. Despite her law degree, a new certification in change management from an ivy league, and over a decade of leadership in the organization, her supervisor pulled her aside and told her she wasn't ready. It was only after her boss realized Asa was a finalist in another search that she advocated for the board to hire her. She got the job, but then discovered that a Black

executive director is held to a very different standard and made demands they had never made to previous leadership. After a year of challenges, she was able to refocus on fundraising and within a year garnered their largest grant to date; 9.5 million dollars. As she was excelling in her work, a retired white male executive on her board began undermining her. He questioned her decisions publicly, expressed doubt in her competence, and planted seeds of conflict amongst other board members. Despite Asa's education, high motivation, organizational history, and ability to advance the organization's goals, she was not always recognized as a legitimate leader at her organization. Her operational credibility and authority was most voraciously questioned when she sought higher leadership positions. In the following sections I'll explain why.

### *The Fairy Godmother Phenomenon*

Along with challenges to her legitimacy manifested as resistance to her leadership, Asa experienced an expectation that Rilene (also a Black woman executive director) described as "to come in like a fairy godmother." The Fairy Godmother phenomenon is racialized and gendered and can be understood as a nonprofit equivalent to cinema's magical negro. In fiction writing and film, the magical negro is typecast as a man who redeems other characters or a community, sometimes even the world, through characteristics such as connection with nature, spiritual embodiment, magical powers, and moral righteousness (Livingston et al. 2017). This character operates in a white context, is apolitical, and most concerned with the wellbeing and or redemption of his white counterparts. Like the magical negro, the fairy godmother is expected to take on a leadership role, often in an organization that has been previously led by white staff, fix the equity problems, please staff and the board, never get tired or require too much from others, unite everyone across racial, class, sexuality and gender lines, all while being the public face of the organization's commitment to diversity. The fairy godmother phenomenon is similar to what

Hill-Collins defines as a controlling image (2000). Controlling images are necessary tools of domination and are utilized to reinforce ideologies about who is valued, worthy, and privileged in a society and who is not. Hill-Collins explained how harmful images such as mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, and the angry Black woman reinforce marginalization of African American women. I argue that the fairy godmother phenomenon is wielded like a controlling image for women of color in nonprofit spaces insomuch as it frames the perceptions and expectations that their colleagues use to determine legitimacy of BIPOC women who come into leadership. When these leaders are expected to earn credibility vis-à-vis a racist and sexist construct, it limits their ability to show up and be seen in their full humanity and sets individuals up for failure when they inevitably behave in a way that resists or does not fulfill the expectations imbued within the stereotype. Rilene, an Executive Director in a national leadership development nonprofit, describes how it felt to start in her executive director role after a white woman co-director left after 15 years;

There's somehow this expectation that what you bring to the table just comes with melanin. It's just blackness. It's not from like all the work that you've done, right? So there's no real thinking about additional work you'll need, the support you'll need- you're just gonna show up as the black lady and the solutions will emerge from your pores.

Earlier in her career, Rilene often performed as a buffer between her white male boss and the rest of the staff. She characterized this style of caretaking leadership as ultimately promoting white supremacy. She would listen to staff's concerns, consider their needs, consider how her supervisor would respond and then she would shape the ask in a way that would assure that her team's needs were heard. In doing this she would also shield her boss from having to account for the impact of his actions:

I was crazy buffering the white dude from the consequences. I was protecting these

people. And, you know, people sometimes are like, "Oh I'm upset about this." I'm like, "Okay, I'll talk to him. I'll talk to him. They want this, blah, blah, blah. People are not gonna be happy if you do that, etc." So you're the filter and what's left inside the filters is all the shit. Eventually, I was like, "No, thank you."

Lauren explained that she was often approached by other women of color throughout her organization who knew she was in leadership and who assumed that her title meant that she could change how white leadership was treating them. Meanwhile she was battling to just get the resources she was promised to do the job she was hired to do. When she announced that she was transitioning out the organization, the staff begged her, "Can you say something before you go? Can you do this thing?" And what they were asking me to do was call out the system, to be like, "These are all the things that are f\*\*ked up about this place." Lauren wrote the memo, her president read it, and instead of responding to the concerns in the letter, he criticized her for sending it to the entire executive team. Black and brown women in leadership find themselves trying to balance earning legitimacy in the eyes of their supervisors with the accountability to fellow staff of color who look to them for support and guidance.

Ironically, these leaders also experience a different type of resistance to their power from BIPOC staff. Asa and Rilene struggled with being asked to cede power almost immediately after they got it. The rules suddenly changed for them in a way that caught them off guard. When I probed further into why Rilene thought this was happening, she hypothesized that staff of color, because they share a common social position, feel more proximity to power and are thus more comfortable challenging it. Asa and Rilene explained that people were demanding that they operate in a way that was impossible within the context of an institution. Unrealistic expectations were coming at these leaders both from those whom they expect to be their allies and from those

who have never been in their corner. The additional burden of negotiation, conflict, and awareness that they were disappointing their folks was painful.

There's also this like expectation that you are supposed to be a source of a certain thing. And then when it doesn't come, whatever that desire is, it's almost like a betrayal. So it's like, if a stranger betrays you, you're like that sucks, or mistreats you, that sucks. But if like your mama mistreats you're like, WHAT? Whoa (Rilene).

Thus, the barriers leaders experience from staff have a positive correlation to legitimacy. As BIPOC leaders are seen as more legitimate, they experience increased challenges from other colleagues of color. In summary, for many of the women who work their way up to in senior roles such as executive or deputy director, the oppressive aspects of nonprofit institutional culture do not disappear. Instead, this study has shown that the more positional power they have, the fiercer the challenges are to their legitimacy, authority, and wellness.

## **5.2 Theme II- Tokens in The Matrix**

One of the interview questions that provided the richest data was “What barriers to your leadership, both minor and significant, have you encountered within institutions?” The current and former executive directors in this study didn’t start out in top positions. Before they experienced the fairy godmother phenomenon, they experienced many other types of resistance. In the following section, I’ll discuss additional findings from the interviews including theorizing that expands our understanding of institutional domination. Tokenization, emerged as a reoccurring theme of the interviews. Literature on tokenism spans across disciplines, including organizational psychology, sociology, gender and ethnic studies. “Tokenism allows workplaces to signal inclusivity while also harboring institutionalized barriers to full integration and career advancement for underrepresented employees” (Giuffre, Dellinger, and Williams 2008).

The BIPOC leaders in this study briefly touched on behaviors previously explored by theorists such as *increased visibility*; when one's identity is obviously distinct from the majority and leads to scrutiny of one's interactions, work, behavior, and appearance and *performance pressure*; when one feels increased stress to achieve at work because of high expectations and outsider status (Kanter 1977). But the types of tokenism that were mentioned most often were other nonprofit cultural norms that are not in the literature. In the following sections, I'll discuss three nonprofit culture phenomena: *the Voice Phenomenon*, *Role Binding*, and *the #2 Phenomenon*.

### *The Voice Phenomenon*

This phenomenon occurs when BIPOC people are elevated into positions of power in which they are expected to be the representative of a particular identity in which the institution is interested in engaging. This is an indicator of tokenization and many leaders who mentioned this phenomenon admitted that they initially embraced it as a way to create meaning and contribute to the health and overall functioning of their organization. White leaders engage in this practice when they regularly consult a BIPOC leader, positioning them as a proxy instead of directly engaging. They expect the leader to do the intellectual and emotional labor of representing a group's interests, communicating desires, and being a go-between for those in power. Although those who hold organizational authority may signal to the leader that they are valued through multiple requests to intervene or communicate with female staff or staff of color, *the voice* is not expected to have broad influence and their leadership is only encouraged when it is useful for a specific goal that those in power dictate. In this research sample, the voice phenomenon was prominent in organizations that were interested in diversity and inclusion but whose leadership did not

understand how sexism or racism were replicated through practices that merely appeared to be invested in sharing power.

### Role Binding and The #2 Phenomenon

“I knew I wanted to be a leader. I did not allow these institutions to use me. I went there with a very specific reason, and these white people thought I just wanted to aspire to be their number two and I was like, no” (Simone). “You can be advanced but only if you're not a threat. What does it mean to not be a threat” (Lauren) Tokenization in the form of *role-binding* was a common theme in the interviews. Leaders explained that their capabilities and potential for advancement were bounded by what their supervisors considered their appropriate role or place within an organization. Role binding for BIPOC leaders reinforces marginalization within their jobs and the field at large because a woman of color’s place is commonly defined as a faithful support to a white executive or *the #2*. As mentioned previously, controlling images, such as the mammy, run like loops in our psyches and enable the continuation of the matrix of domination in nonprofits. Role binding is possible because of unequal power relations and is performed by those in power on those with less and is utilized to control how authority, money, legitimacy and resources is distributed and accessed. Joy, a black woman who is an executive director of a national advocacy organization, explained that when she moved out of government and into a similar role within her previous nonprofit, she was instructed to run all of her proposals through her white woman supervisor, who ran them through her white male supervisor before they were presented to the executive director. These individuals often took credit for her ideas and more than once told her to “stay in her lane” when she would questioned how this arrangement invisibilized her contributions. Lauren, formerly an executive director and director for a large social justice nonprofit, had multiple titles at her last organization that were labeled as

promotions, but the longer she was there, she went from reporting directly to the president to having two additional bosses, rendering her ability to make decisions about her programs even more difficult and time consuming. Role binding can happen despite titles or pay; it is about limiting a leaders' power and influence based on racialized and gendered expectations. All the leaders in this study who experienced role-binding eventually left their organizations (see figure 1, the model of a BIPOC leaders' professional arc).

*The Voice Phenomenon, Role Binding and the #2 Phenomenon findings* build on the organizational studies literature and addresses critiques that tokenization studies poorly explain what underlying social forces cause these experiences (Putnam 2003) (Harvey Wingfield and Harvey Wingfield 2014). I want to reemphasize here that one of the purposes of this research is to build a posteriori knowledge of Hill-Collins' matrix of oppression theory. Hegemonic domination sustains and supports itself at the interpersonal, structural, and disciplinary levels and is the source of resistance the women of color leaders encounter in this study. Addressing domination in nonprofit culture can be difficult because of the underlying assumptions that nonprofits are more equitable spaces to work. Because of the racial reckoning that occurred after the police murders and subsequent uprisings of 2020, many nonprofit institutions across the United States have responded by listening more to their BIPOC staff, hiring anti-racism consultants, facilitating diversity and inclusion trainings, implementing organization-wide equity assessments, funding affinity groups, rebranding, and taking action to recenter the communities that they have been claiming to serve. However, some study participants have observed that white leadership's energy seems to have been exhausted, and despite a few new policies, written diversity statements and more people of color in leadership, they are now reluctant to take the next step to disrupt less obvious forms of domination such as those discussed in the findings

discussed. Some of the leaders who were interviewed characterized their organizations (current and former) as doing just enough to perform empowerment of Black and brown leaders while remaining comfortable in their positions. I argue that the real measurement of a healthy nonprofit culture that is resisting the matrix of oppression is how willing the organization is to invest in its BIPOC leaders' visions, to create pathways for their advancement, and to commit to unlearning white supremacist ways of operating over the long term.

## **5.2 Theme III - Internalized Racism**

Internalized racism, also known as appropriated racial oppression, can be defined as “the individual inculcation of the racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated by the White dominant society about one’s racial group, leading to feelings of self-doubt, disgust, and disrespect for one’s race and/or oneself” (Pyke 2010). This concept was first theorized by scholars of color in the 1960s and 1970s. Franz Fanon, Paulo Freire, and Albert Memmi wrote about this insidious consequence for oppressed people, and despite being an established concept, it is not well-studied or understood (David, Schroeder, and Fernandez 2019). It is important to bring this concept into this analysis, because not all BIPOC leaders strive for or embody a liberatory consciousness, nor are all Black and brown leaders uniformly committed to upending the culture of nonprofits. A marginalized identity does not a liberatory consciousness make. Analysis of the data showed that when it came to role binding and the #2 phenomenon, internalized racism often operates as a moderating variable to systemic and institutional oppression. Internalized racism is an understandable consequence to living in a society that consistently sends messages through media, social agreements, education, government and other personal structural and institutional methods that whiteness is the most valuable state of being.

The barriers and phenomena we have discussed up to this point have been primarily enacted through the institutional and interpersonal levels of the matrix of oppression; internalized racism is a psychological phenomenon that impacts the individual's attitudes, actions, and the expectations and judgements of those around them. In my interviews, indicators and implications of internalized racism included:

- BIPOC colleagues discouraging each other from pursuing leadership positions
- BIPOC colleagues with power, aligning themselves with oppressive nonprofit practices
- BIPOC staff questioning the intentions of leaders of color once they are promoted

Simone, who has been organizing since she was a teenager, had many supportive Black women mentors throughout her career and when she returned to school to pursue a PhD. Her first role after graduation was at an organization known for its policy work. She described how the executive director's internalized racism impacted the organization:

I learned how people commodify equity and blackness to their own liking, but there's no deep connection and love to blackness and black people. It was painful to see this... I mean it was the worst. She wouldn't allow black staff to talk to each other. Anybody from an HBCU was automatically ruled out because she said their skills were inferior... I don't got no problem with you being a hard ass, as long as you are a deeply centered one. No, this was not that. This was; 'I have some deep resentment about blackness, but I commodify it in a way that works for me.' So that was one of the most toxic environments I've ever worked in, and to do that with a black woman was just a lot.

Simone left this organization and later joined a white-led nonprofit. Internalized racism manifested in this setting as well, but instead of overt executive director policies, her colleagues behavior was subtle and she observed Black and brown women, with more skills than their superiors, directly or implicitly communicating that they would not challenge them (in this case white women) for higher positions. Earlier I presented a model for BIPOC leaders' professional

trajectory, but it is important to note that this trajectory only starts after the leaders choose to pursue advancement.

Other interviewees who had positions in large national/global nonprofits, explained that they and other BIPOC leaders had to sacrifice and make compromises to be given a raise or a promotion. These sacrifices included doing more work with fewer resources, tempering their asks for more equitable practices, and accepting management's lack of interest in making changes that would address unequal organizational patterns in how Black and brown staff were compensated, invested in, hired, fired, and promoted.

There's a spectrum of how people think that they can evoke change within an organization. Some of them think it's screaming and yelling; Some say I have to get closer to my manager and I'm going to whisper things in their ear. But I think those strategies, both of them are necessary. But sometimes what I ran up against is the anger that I felt with older generations of black women who would say things like, "Well that's just asking for too much." And that was always disheartening. Like, how could I be wanting too much by wanting what I want? Racism is Racism.

Most of Anika's senior staff of color were unwilling to help organize to demand higher salaries, more BIPOC hiring, analysis of promotion inequities, and access to disaggregated staffing data. Many of them aligned themselves with white leaders who held similar amounts of power at their organization. Internalized racism isn't necessarily limited to self-hate, it is also making the choice to block or resist the effort to bring attention to oppression by those who share your identity. Simone recounted an interaction at an affinity group that illustrates how internalized oppression is intertwined with role binding as discussed in the preceding chapter.

They were having this conference and some black women were talking about leadership there. And girl, we were getting into it because they were like, "You know what? As black women, we need to just work. We shouldn't need to worry about leadership." They were like, "Basically we're going to let the heavens and all this sort of stuff take care of it." Hell to the no, you're not going to do that! You've got to be intentional about leadership. You've got to know every day when you get up, this is what you're working for because it'll help you make decisions, know where to spend your time at and what

bullshit to engage in, what bullshit to move out from-- You better do it and nobody is looking out for you.

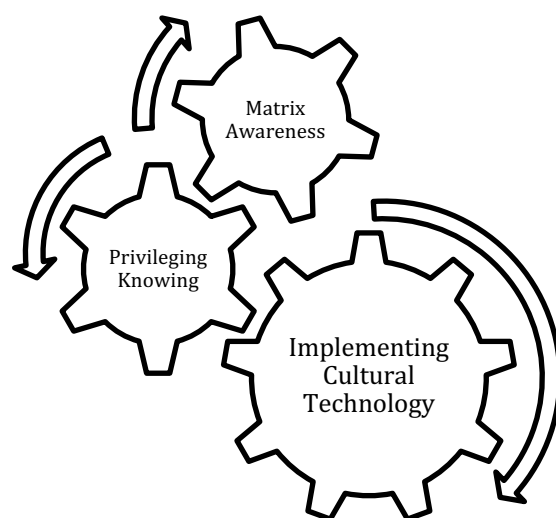
Anika also recounted stories of advocating to have more power within her organization, and unfortunately, she also had to convince other leaders of color that she had just as much right to determine strategy and make hard decisions as her white colleagues.

Simone explained how some of her colleagues' internalized racism impacted their career trajectory. She observed Black and brown women, with more skills than their superiors, directly or implicitly communicated that they would not challenge them for higher positions. Earlier I presented a model for BIPOC leaders' professional trajectory, but it is important to note that this trajectory only starts after the leaders choose to pursue advancement.

### **5.3 Theme IV- Liberatory Consciousness Development in Contested Space**

Patricia Hill-Collins' and Anzaldúa's outsider-within and mestiza theories provide a starting point for understanding the position and practices of marginalized BIPOC women leaders. My research aimed to understand if these practices were utilized in contested nonprofit spaces and second, it aimed to expand upon these concepts by examining the resilience practices leaders utilized and developed. The outsider-within practices were more specific and arguably most relevant to understanding how leaders behave as a result of developing a liberatory consciousness. Hill Collins' theory was based on the experiences of Black women academics whose institutional realities are similar to women of color in nonprofits. The Outsider Within Practices are self-definition, self-valuation, embracing intersectionality, creativity/self-expression, working for institutional transformations, and elevating the outsider-within viewpoint. All of the interviewees gave examples of these practices, but what is most significant, is that a model of liberatory consciousness development emerged from the analysis of the

interviews. I've organized this model into three stages or *revolutions* of liberatory consciousness development. 1) Matrix Awareness, 2) Privileging Knowing, and 3) Implementing Cultural Technology. Matrix Awareness occurs when BIPOC leaders recognize the personal and societal impacts and oppressive patterns of domination and unearned privilege. Privileging Knowing occurs when BIPOC leaders prioritize non-dominant ways of understanding social interactions and power relations while problematizing the hegemonic norms of what is normal and acceptable. Leaders act on their motivation, decolonize their thinking and approach to their vocation by centering their (marginalized) ways of knowing. Implementing Cultural Technology occurs as BIPOC leaders apply resistance and resilience strategies in oppressive settings.



*Figure 2 Model of Liberatory Consciousness Development in Contested Space*

### **Matrix Awareness**

The leaders who were interviewed for this study come from various socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, yet all had formative experiences that developed their critique of power

and taught them that social systems were not in their favor, that their personhood and in turn, their leadership, was marginalized. Some of these initial experiences came as children, others after earning degrees and attending prestigious universities. Simone, an executive director of a large educational nonprofit explained that she grew up in a middle-class in a tight knit black community and engaged in nonprofits as a teenager, “I just thought our world was fine. But then as I was running this nonprofit and I started visiting other communities all over New York... that’s when I learned about power inequities.” She experienced being over policed, harassed and threatened by officers who viewed the groups of young Black kids she worked with as suspicious. She recounted the scary reality of doing community-based social justice work in areas that she later realized were “sundown towns”.

I remember we had a lot of youth-ran creative businesses because we used to do a lot of youth entrepreneurship and so one of the businesses that we had was a lawn care business. And we as young people raise money by having garage sales...and we raised a couple of thousand dollars by having garage sales every week and throwing community parties. We used to open up vacant buildings and throw parties in them and charge people five dollars. We had DJs, we had equipment in there for the night or whatever. That's how we used to raise money. People were like, "Well how did you get the money? Did you have a funder?" We had no funder. We were just doing stuff! And I remember we raised thousands of dollars to get some lawn care equipment so our young people could have a job and all this other stuff. And we had a client that lived in one of the sundown towns that was near us in Long Island, and the cops came-- This is the type of issues that we used to deal with all the time because we were quarantined living in New York. We only had to stay in our community as Black people. So if we were seen outside of our community after six o'clock, cops would stop us. They'd wanna search our van. We're like, “Look we're 16 years old. Are you kidding me?” They would confiscate all our f\*\*king equipment.

Simone was trained in Alinsky style organizing in Chicago, and as a 15-year-old she got answers to the questions that were burning in her mind like “how come people in my neighborhood that are Black have so little and these white neighborhoods have so much?”

Lauren, who also grew up in New York and Philadelphia with her immigrant parents, received a Catholic education and had a very different orientation to how power worked. In her school and family, she was seen as a leader from an early age. She went to liberal arts college, found a path to formal leadership and eventually was hired as the first non-white executive director of a national professional membership organization. Part of her job was to organize and fundraise for a national conference in collaboration with leaders from the organizations' chapters. She recounted a poignant meeting with board members during her first year:

I have this one vivid memory of planning our national conference and we were cohosting with our DC chapter which is a very large, very well-organized, powerful chapter. I was talking to a couple members of the board, and one of the dudes on the call was like, "Well what's the budget for the conference?" I responded, "Usually, someone says, 'You have 10 dollars, spend it.' But what we do is we kind of come up with what our dream is and how we want to use this space and what we hope is possible, and then we go see how much money we can raise and we can scale up or scale back based on how much we can raise." I was the only woman, the only black person on the call; it was me and four white guys. And one of them was like, "I'm just gonna say it. I feel like you don't know how to do math." He said those words, and one of the other guys was like, "Yeah, thank you."

Lauren identified this moment as an apex of understanding how her identity influenced her legitimacy in a space in which she generally felt celebrated and possessed a great deal of autonomy; she explained that after that call she felt hurt but doubtful, "Maybe they're right. They all said it so maybe I don't know what I'm talking about". What these leaders are describing is both being placed and locating themselves within the matrix of oppression via the experience of losing their dignity in racialized and gendered acts of power. As stated previously, the matrix of oppression operates at different levels, but we often experience it most viscerally at the interpersonal level. Simone was trained to organize and understand power and was dedicated to working against structural oppression of young people who were both victims of geographic segregation and economic inequities, and it was through political education and these direct interactions with police officers that she became conscious of her and her young charges place in

the matrix. And Lauren, despite holding a powerful position in an organization, was casually ridiculed by individuals who were supposed to be in her corner.

What is also critical to understanding the emergence of liberatory consciousness is that these experiences operate as triggers and repeat over time. Anzaldúa's description of these tipping points is useful here: "anything that breaks into one's everyday mode of perception that causes a break in one's defenses and resistance, anything that takes one from one's habitual grounding ...that causes a shift in perception" (1987:39). Liberatory consciousness development looks less like a straight line and more like interlocking gears. Matrix awareness is a necessary internal revolution that activates a shift in consciousness toward a politicized understanding of social conditions. Concurrently, we must think of this process unfolding against the backdrop of engrained patterns of domination that are dynamic but ever-present, always operating to maintain hegemony. BIPOC leaders' understanding of power is shaped by both having power and through being abused by those with more. These abuses do not happen all at once, and leaders do not necessarily recognize that they can or should resist. For example, Lauren explained her initial response to being told she couldn't do math was to question herself, but her response to these incidents eventually changed as a part of what she described as "a slow process of coming into consciousness". It was years later after her conversation with the board that she began to validate her perspective and act accordingly.

### **Privileging Knowing and Implementing Cultural Technology**

This first revolution in the liberatory consciousness process, Matrix Awareness, creates movement in by catalyzing internal adjustments to how leaders think and understand their place in the world, their relationships, and their work. The second revolution, Privileging Knowing

creates the mental space and assurance for leaders to practice centering non dominant ways of being. This space catalyzes practice of cultural technology that these leaders utilize to accomplish their goals and further social justice. These internal revolutions are a result of leaders repeatedly encountering resistance.

### *The Gift of Suspicion*

When leaders recognize that when their legitimacy is being questioned within the matrix and encountering opposition does not inherently mean they are wrong, they become willing to resist and more assured in their understanding and critiquing of power relations within individual interactions and at the broader organizational level. Lauren describes her inner monologue after being told she couldn't do math. The following quote represents the full liberatory consciousness development process:

I remember the way they were reacting to each other, thinking, "Oh well it's obviously true. Like there's obviously something that they all know and understand that is true that I can't see." So what I think is significant about that is that we're always in spaces where the people that are not like me in the room are all seeing something different and putting primary as something different, and I'm having an experience of like, "What? That's not how I see it at all," But what's different today is now I treat that thing with suspicion. Like this thing that you all have committed yourselves to that I can't see at all... Is that thing for me? Do I not see it because it has been intentionally designed for me not to see it or for me not to deserve it? This thing that you all see I'm suspicious of it. I'm going to question that thing.

Questioning the thing is *the gift of suspicion*, a skill that is accessible when leaders begin to decolonize their minds and progress through the liberatory consciousness development process. As Lauren began to utilize this gift, it created opportunities for her to propose alternatives and to utilize what she was observing from an outsider-within standpoint. For example, four years ago, when she was asked to develop a cohort style leadership program for women of color, she resisted the temptation to provide a skills-based series of workshops that centered teaching Black

and brown leaders how to operate within the context of nonprofits. Instead, she asked for their input on what was actually needed to push their work forward and began with the assumption that these women already had valuable skills and experience. She insisted that the focus should be on cultivating their strengths and examining models that could help propel their visions for equity and liberation in their workplaces. When privileged individuals who are in positions of power are making decisions about how to solve problems within marginalized communities, they must question assumptions and biases, and the gift of suspicion is one mechanism that creates a pathway for these equity strategies. Shala, a deputy director for a national organization provides another example of utilizing gift of suspicion when the board for her national organization was pushing for organizational success metrics. She explained how she questioned the assumptions commonly underpinning how their organization defined winning:

My career has shifted from caring about if we won campaigns [to] how we won them and how it felt at the end. Like were we whole people still? Did we have fractured relationships or were we intact as a community and as a body, because if you have a base of a million people, and they have not had political education, they're not invested, and they have not been developed, I don't care if we have a million. You know, who are the million? And if we win campaigns, and we end up broken and fractured in ourselves, our bodies or our relationships, who cares?

After leaders develop a critical understanding of oppression, what it means for their personal lives, their communities, and their work, they begin privileging their knowing. They act on their motivation, decolonize their thinking, and approach to their vocation from their (marginalized) ways of knowing and being.

Hill Collins theorized that Black women academics operated as insider-outsiders when they were actively resisting the matrix of oppression from a position that contains elements of power (2000). Leaders of color in this study also operated in this way within their institution. However, as was discussed in the previous section, BIPOC women leaders can internalize racist

stereotypes, controlling narratives, and leadership styles that further their marginalization and others. Privileging knowing and implementing cultural technologies may not happen for every leader, and the process of developing a liberatory consciousness is not standardized. Rilene explained that after she was hired at a mid-size cultural development foundation after teaching overseas, initially her approach was to adjust, not to disrupt:

It's a navigation because it's not like I rejected it. I was like, "Okay, this is a way that I can occupy this space." But that changed over time; later I thought, "but do I want to occupy the space in this way? I don't know. Maybe I want to modify the way I occupy the space." And that grew into saying who I am and how I am, how I look, and how I've experienced the world influences the way I lead. I realized it [my leadership] doesn't have to be so much like other people's perceptions, and I don't know how to say it other than I started privileging my knowing.

And

Anika, a director at a large international aid organization explained that she grew up in two worlds, the world of her majority white private schools and the world filled with the wisdom and realities of her Black southern family. Her consciousness was shaped by always being the only or one of the few Black people in institutional spaces across her lifetime. Anika was both an insider and outsider who, like Anzaldúa's *mestiza* was able to live in two worlds, conscious of her place in each. Experiencing these dualistic spaces shaped her consciousness by revealing how the matrix operated on her as a Black woman. Her awareness of the matrix deepened when she went on to work in a US-led global development nonprofit; she witnessed the elevation of inexperienced white and male colleagues into positions that gave them resources and the privilege to make decisions for economically disadvantaged Black and brown communities. She described how a former big box store executive, who had no experience in international development or foundation work, was hired and within months was given a multi-million-dollar budget to implement an untested idea across Africa and South Asia. When she became a nonprofit director, she pushed for a reorientation of decision-making in her department that

helped to shift power to those directly impacted by injustice. She created a global fund to grant money to people organizing within their own communities.

Sandoval theorized that methodologies of the oppressed fell into five categories: semiotics, deconstruction, and meta-ideologizing, democratics, and differential movement (2000:114). Differential movement is the capacity to utilize the four preceding methodologies in service of social justice. The research findings showed that BIPOC women leaders often engaged in differential movement, utilizing two methods most prominently: semiotics and domination. Semiotics is the process of awareness (noticing and interpreting) what appears natural in dominant culture as a production of power and dominance, and deconstruction is the process of stripping cultural signifiers down to their parts. In my model of liberatory consciousness, *Placing Oneself in the Matrix and Privileging Knowing* involves both processes. In an institutional context, professional roles and titles are cultural signifiers- for example- the fundraiser position is often associated with white men who are viewed as best able to access and manage money. The manifestation of the cultural signifier in Lauren's story was the shared assumption that the white men on the board understood more about finances and therefore, she as the Black woman, Executive Director, clearly did not "know how to do math." Cultural signifiers are one sided, and they are 'cultural' because they reflect the hegemony within which they operate. In the US nonprofit context, white male = leader, fundraiser, and final authority. These type of outsider-within experiences developed Lauren's liberatory consciousness- her awareness of the matrix and, a decade later, to privilege her knowing, apply the gift of suspicion and could stand in her power and implement cultural technology that preserved her sense of self while expanding her effectiveness as a leader and strategist. *Matrix Awareness and Privileging Knowing* are foundational to BIPOC leaders' ability to innovate and resist within institutions. In addition to

The Gift of Suspicion, participants described two other cultural technology practices: developing new theories of change and creating liberated zones, which will be explored in the following section.

### *Developing New Theories of Change*

Nonprofits have a core mission, often prominent on their websites and materials, as well as internal logic on what they want to accomplish and how. BIPOC leaders are not often responsible (or trusted) to articulate what outcomes their organizations must achieve to be successful and how it should go about achieving them (Forti 2012). These leaders enter the nonprofit world with their own understanding of the matrix of oppression whether or not they had the language to describe it. They also hold varying levels of trust in their organizations to be viable pathways to effecting change in the communities they care about. Interviewees mentioned several times that they started nonprofit work with the belief that their workplaces were havens for altruistic people who cared more about people than money. This is not surprising, as Maribel Morey's research has shown, the US cultural narrative around foundations and 501C3's in this country was designed by multi-millionaires who established the tax designation to minimize their tax burden (Morey 2021). Historically, this narrative has served its intended political end with the unintentional modern consequence of setting up nonprofit employees for disappointment when they realize these organizations are increasingly operating like businesses and BIPOC staff in particular feel like they are dealing with unmet expectations in addition to the challenges of fighting for professional legitimacy and struggling against systematic racism. Developing their own theories of change became necessary as they realized that the outcomes they hoped to achieve were stymied by their organizations' approaches, culture, and practices. I am

intentionally employing the “Theory of Change” terminology because the nonprofit field has increasingly utilized these conceptual models in their strategic planning as a tool to guide their approach to community work (Forti 2012).

A theory of change is the organizations’ rationale on the nature of a problem and how that problem can be solved. Because organizations are contested spaces that operate within and further hegemonic norms, the ideas and beliefs about the nature of the problems within marginalized or vulnerable communities, the solutions, and possibilities are often defined by those most proximate to power. Nonprofit leaders of color who hold positions that come with privilege may or may not promote marginalized views in the workplace. This was reflected in the stories of participants in this study. Their level of overt promotion varied due to a few factors; one; their own sense of confidence in questioning established organizational practices, two, the amount of resistance to centering perspectives outside of privileged channels, and three, the potential risks to their (mental, emotional, economic) safety.

With these factors at play, several interviewees described how they argued for new theories of change at their nonprofits. Shea, a deputy director of a large national base-building and political advocacy organization describes her theory of change this way: "It's about the intimacy that we can build through human connection, the gifts we give one another through deep listening, the way that we make others feel heard and seen and held in the perfect mess that each of us is, is the most beautiful thing that we can do." This theory of change prioritizes non-dominant ways of understanding nonprofit work, specifically political organizing, and the definition of a valuable outcome. Shea implemented a healing justice framework in an established, formerly white-led organization that relied on transactional metrics to measure the success of their organizing work.

Xola and Justice, founding leaders of a national immigrant rights organization, began organizing in their teenage years for The Dream Act. Although they were raised in this country, they learned that they and many other young people in their community would be denied access to college and other supports because they were undocumented. They witnessed families torn apart by deportation and broken US immigration policies. After years of volunteering, they wanted to take a new approach to galvanize others who were in the same position and provide resources for them to fight for policy changes. The nonprofits they worked with balked at giving money to undocumented young people and discouraged them from centering their strategy on those who were vulnerable to deportation and over policing. The organization leaders were approaching the problem from a position of privilege. Xola and Justice were fighting for their futures and their theory of change centered those who had the most to lose and gain from their work. Their organization was started from an approach that was in resistance to the strategies of powerful people, and yet their campaigns, including marches and hunger strikes led to major wins for communities and young undocumented people in the United States.

Anika's theory of change emerged after several years of observing how Black and brown staff and communities were disempowered at her organization; she started to see the issues but didn't know what to do about it. "I knew in my brain that going in and swooping in and helping people was a problem, but I never had the understanding on how to shift that." Instead of trying to create a solution alone, her theory of change emerged through multiple conversations with program participants and staff of color over time. She proposed that bringing funders into alignment with the idea of relinquishing power and more intentional resourcing of those who were closest to the problem would be a more effective and equitable way to do development work. "Stepping back and... essentially letting our organization die a little bit, and

let these local organizations, let these local groups, the local leadership lead the way for their own solutions." Bringing these perspectives from margin to center (Hooks 1984/2000), these leaders were exercising what scholars call critical perspective. Eikenberry, Sandberg, and Mirabella define critical perspective "as an attempt to dig beneath the surface of (often hidden) historically specific, social structures and processes such as those related to politics, economics, culture, discourse, gender, and race to illuminate how they lead to oppression and then to also reveal ways to change these structures" (2018). Anzaldúa's articulation of the psychological-social-emotional journey of developing a critical perspective as *The Mestiza Way* is helpful because it reminds us that the experiences that these leaders have had, from children experiencing oppressive systems to nonprofit leaders navigating institutional spaces, influences how they see the world and consequently how they resist and transform it.

Critical theories of change advanced by BIPOC leaders provide a counter narrative to hegemonic ways of being and working. Scholars have argued that counter storytelling is an effective strategy for disruption of white masculine space (Nickels and Leach 2021). Shea and Anika's theories of change provided a counter narrative within their organizations, however the results were not the same. Shea received real support and resources to implement a healing justice training across her institution. The administration and her supervisor (a Black woman) trusted her and saw her theory of change as a valid approach to internal development and strategy. Anika was encouraged and provided resources, but her recommendations were framed as something she was personally expected to lead and implement instead of an institutional commitment.

*Creating Liberated Zones*

I don't know the places we go to get love. I know this is about organizations, but it's like I have to build places for love that are places I can draw energy from because they're not naturally there for us. (Simone)

Liberatory space creation is a powerful resistance strategy and coping mechanism for liberatory leaders in contested spaces. Liberatory space is analogous to the concept of liberated zones; physical resistance spaces cultivated as a refuge for oppressed peoples that operate outside of state governance. Leftist and post-colonial leaders and scholars taught us that survival is sometimes predicated on our ability to withdraw, not only to fight. This creation of maroon space by those escaping slavery is the most quintessential expressions of this idea, and despite being hundreds of years from this overt level of oppression in the United States, the lessons still remain. Creating spaces for healing, love, and support within contested spaces creates possibilities that don't exist otherwise. Hill Collins explains that the involvement in safe cultural spaces "provides the ideological frame of reference—namely, the symbols and values of self-definition and self-valuation that assist Black women in seeing the circumstances shaping race, class, and gender oppression" (2000). BIPOC leaders often enter nonprofit organizations with a sense of hope and expectation that the environment will provide them with what they need to do meaningful work, only to slowly discover that the organization's public narratives are misaligned with the internal experience. Anika shared that developing a liberated space helped her and other marginalized people of color at her job to survive.

It was so isolating, so I did create essentially pocket communities of black women mostly. We'd come together for dinners, and we'd hole up in each other's offices so we could just work and not deal with anything, send each other strategy messages like when somebody was like, "I'm gonna ask for this f\*\*king promotion," but I know she's not

gonna give it to me. Okay, let's strategize on how to get it out their hands and into someone else's."

All the leaders interviewed for this study discussed participation in these types of spaces and several not only participated, but they also created liberated spaces within and outside of institutions. When the leaders spoke of their reasons for creating affinity groups, sister circles, or support groups, they included having emotional support, to gain an understanding of the institutional context and culture from colleagues who had been at the organization longer, to strategize about how to overcome organizational barriers to accomplish their goals, and to resist the feelings and tangible consequences of marginalization by supervisors and colleagues with power to maintain entrenched, unequal structures. Safe cultural spaces spurred liberatory consciousness by creating the opportunity and security for leaders to examine their experiences in community with each other. For leaders who aren't at the top executive levels in their organizations, liberated zones also make it possible for them to keep their source of income while not succumbing to a toxic work environment. Leaders will not always leave nonprofits simply because there are barriers. There are many reasons for this and one that was most prominent in the analysis was that due to their social location, BIPOC women across generations are often providing financial support for more than themselves or their immediate family. Having a steady job is about more than individual security. As Simone explained:

I have a lot of people I keep in touch with at my former organization and they're kind of embarrassed that they're still there. I tell people, there's no shame. We're doing the things that we have to in order to survive, and many of us are attached to extractive economies, including the nonprofit industrial complex. I know you need health insurance, and I know that this country does not offer it. I know that this job is the first job that allowed you take care of yourself and help out your family. I know that you're in this professional position, but you're one generation out of poverty. I know.

Simone went on to say that she only felt it was possible to remain in her position as an executive director because she had the support of a small group of other women of color executive directors that she connected with regularly.

Joy and Asa, who are executive directors, expanded on this idea and explained that having spaces to be vulnerable and talk about the unique struggles of their positions with other women like themselves made it possible for them to return to their organizations and to build trust amongst their colleagues. “Culture eats strategy for breakfast,” Joy emphasized when describing why she and her executive team put so much energy into setting norms to center liberatory values. She and Asa both became executive directors after the exit of white female predecessors and struggled to shape their organizations into spaces where their leadership would be respected and nourished. They teach us that creating an organization-wide liberated zone is not as simple as a leader telling people how things should be different. Asa hired a consultant who taught both her board and her staff about the racialized challenges of being a Black woman in power and provided concrete methods that could be taken to support her leadership. Joy hired a consultant to develop an assessment of her organization’s culture and utilized those findings to identify shared values that her and her team utilize to guide their policies and ways of being with each other. Justice was young and undocumented when she began to see the need for spaces that centered the ideas and strategies of those most impacted by oppression. She found that despite working for the same goals with the white leadership of the immigrant rights orgs and having the actual experience of being an undocumented living in the United States, she and other undocumented youth often struggled to have organizational influence. They build community through regular meetings and ongoing communication which eventually led to the development

of what is now a national organization that functions as a “liberated zone” within the field of immigrant rights organizing.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Reflections on Methodology and Process**

Qualitative interviewing is a powerful method for exploring theoretical concepts and deepening our understanding of complex social phenomenon. Storytelling is only one part of qualitative research, the scientist must analyze, interpret, and write. This method allowed me to connect to the women in the study, to see their faces and hear their voices, to share my stories and to respond organically to moments of vulnerability. One of the barriers to conducting studies on people’s professional experiences is the risk of jeopardizing relationships or their position by exposing their organization or former or current supervisors. The choice to use aliases and to deidentify organizations reassured participants that they could speak freely and that their identity would be protected. The research participants were not hesitant to share intimate details about their lives. They told me about their pregnancies, their traumatic PhD experiences, their relationships with their parents, their disappointments, their hurts and their hard-earned successes.

The nonprofit field is just beginning to examine their complicity in perpetuating racism, sexism, and inequity within their organizations while they work to serve oppressed people. Critical scholars such as Ross (2022), Danley and Blessett (2022), Coule, Doge, and Eikenberry (2020) have begun to problematize organizational development and nonprofit studies and bring

attention to the toxic contradictions in philanthropy and nonprofit organizational culture. These conversations teach us that leaders of color have a different experience than white leaders, and that hiring BIPOC staff is meaningless and harmful when those staff are expected to thrive in organizational culture that replicates oppression. The women I interviewed were able to catalyze institutional transformation but to varying degrees, and when they did, it was often at great personal cost. Sometimes the culture was so entrenched and the emotional and mental strain so high, the leaders felt compelled to leave for their mental and/or physical health. This study provides evidence that deep transformations are necessary for nonprofits to act in alignment with their stated mission and values.

I expected to gather narratives about how leaders of color decolonized their minds and changed everything- and by everything, I expected to learn just as much about the ways organizations shifted under their influence as I did about the leaders' professional trajectory and interior landscape. I didn't expect for women of color to have so many different types of challenges to their success in nonprofits. The lesson here is that representation is not enough. Many leaders enter their roles committed to making change with the power of an organization behind them but are less convinced that making lasting internal changes to institutions is possible or even their job. They have come to these conclusions after years of speaking truth to power only to be told to be patient or that they are misinterpreting the circumstances or outcomes of long standing organizational norms. Additionally, leaders who are brought on after white leaders transition out, experience a range of expectations that are racialized, gendered, complex to navigate and are often unreasonable. It is dangerous to expect BIPOC leaders to show up as fairy godmothers, eager to fix long standing inequities within structures and systems that continue to reward and inherently support the way things have always been done. What is missing from most

nonprofit literature, outside of critical nonprofit studies, is the recognition that white dominant structures are antithetical to liberation and equality. Fulton, Oyakawa and Wood's article "Leaders of Color Advancing Racial Equality in Predominantly White Organizations" highlights nonprofits general agreements that representation is a silver bullet to inequitable workplaces. These authors and many others in nonprofit studies literature frame organizational transformation as an inevitable outcome of the presence of Black and brown people in leadership. But this type of thinking is troublesome because it promotes the misconception that transformation is one-sided. Organizations are not neutral, nor are they a waiting vacuum for BIPOC leaders to fill. Institutional change can only advance when people stop creating resistance to it. There are active policies, ways of being, and cultural norms that actively work against Black and brown leaders' success and liberatory practice. Despite the popular arguments to the contrary, Black and brown leaders are not magic.

The leaders in this study teach us that organizations need to spend more energy listening to what BIPOC leaders need after they're in positions of authority, and that an analysis of how their current policies and cultural practices marginalize leaders of color is critical to making it possible for leaders to spend their energy fighting for justice instead of fighting for dignity within their own organizations .

## **6.2 Areas for Further Research**

This dissertation study has provided important insights however the research raised as many questions as it answered. I didn't expect the negative adaptations to oppression to have such a prominent role in my findings. Internalized racism was not a topic I intended to write much about at the start of this research. Something that emerged from the interviews was that many of the leaders have been navigating severe systemic challenges to their wellbeing and

dignity since childhood. Those who grew up in poor communities, those who were undocumented or criminalized early because of their immigration status or the color of their skin had a deep well of determination that became visceral as they recounted decades of harm. The matrix of oppression isn't just an idea, it's a brutal web in which we are all entangled. It's reasonable to hypothesize that the leaders in this study who experienced the most trauma also have the highest level of resilience and in their positions their resilience is exploited by their supervisors and their institutions. So, what does this mean? Audre Lorde argued that oppressed people caring for themselves is political warfare (1988). If systems of oppression are waging war on Black and brown leaders, then organizations who are committed to their thriving must choose a side. They must create and hold their staff and boards accountable to internal policies that are pro-black, pro-women, and anti-racist. They must provide wellness benefits, health benefits, encourage time off, stop undervaluing and underpaying people of color and refuse to let BIPOC leaders be bullied. These are some ways to start battling the legacy of oppression within the contested spaces of nonprofits. Future research is needed to examine the results of these types of interventions.

In the meantime, not all leaders can exit an organization or start one of their own if they're being mistreated. As both Lauren and Simone explained, there are many reasons Black and brown staff may stay and navigate institutions that are threatening to their wellness. Executive directors and people in high-level leadership roles have unique challenges such as having unrealistic expectations to save an organization or to convert it into a socialist paradise, but staff of color also struggle in these environments. Future research inquiry could examine the experiences of people who are in support and non-executive roles in nonprofits. For example, staff unions have been promoted as a way for staff, especially marginalized staff to have more

institutional power. Do these mechanisms work? And what other ways do staff of color navigate varying levels of power? Are these methods different because of their position within the organization?

In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Sandoval spends the latter part of her book discussing the link between oppositional consciousness, movement, and ultimately, love. One of the critiques of my Sociology studies and the field as a whole is its preoccupation with social problems, ironically most students' first introduction to the field is through a class by that very name. Because I entered my sociology PhD with a history of community work, activism, and social work training, I always found myself gravitating to the response to the issues we sociologists so thoroughly diagnosed. To complete a PhD means that you are referred to thereafter as "doctor", and I am at my fullest scholarly potential when I understand both the illnesses of our society and the cures. I wanted to radically understand how Angela Davis taught us to, by grabbing this issue from the root (2006). Yet, I also felt compelled in the research process not to get lost in all of the trauma that my interviewees experienced. The experiences of Black and brown women who try to lead in our country's nonprofits are wild. Some of this stuff sounds like a badly written novel...They hired you only for you to have to fire half the staff shortly after because the board didn't mention they had a massive budget shortfall? You were told not to hire Black people from HBCU's because they were inferior, and the person making these demands was another Black woman? You're an executive director with a master's degree and a group of people tell you to your face that you don't know how to do math? You work so hard to prove yourself and fight for your people until the only reason you've finally slowed down because you have multiple illnesses?

Listening to the women speak about the million ways their dignity was questioned broke my heart. And the map of institutional barriers they helped me to chart will hopefully provide validation to the leaders who read this research. The leaders in this study also taught me how they innovated in their circumstances and how they managed to question the myths of the matrix. They provided a plausible process for liberatory consciousness that other BIPOC leaders can follow. Foucault said, where there is power, there is resistance. And it is the resistance that gives me hope.

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**APPENDIX****Interview protocol****Participant Invitation Email****Consent Form**

## Interview protocol

1. Please tell me about your journey to leadership:
  - a. What are some of the tipping points or catalysts that have led you to where you are today?
2. People of color can often describe the moment when they realize that they're different- or separate from whiteness. Have you experienced a similar moment where you understood that your leadership was received differently than white or male leadership?
  - a. *If yes-* Tell me about it
  - b. *If yes-* How did that change how you operated?
3. How do you navigate the complexity of being a leader of color in the nonprofit context?
4. What barriers to your leadership, both minor and significant, have you encountered within institutions? (*Including policies, people, org culture*)
  - a. Would you share some specific examples?
  - b. How did you respond to these barriers?
  - c. Did your response to these barriers change over time?
    - i. *If yes-* In what ways?
    - ii. *If yes-* Why?
    - iii. *If no-* Why not?
5. What do you think the consequences are of having to overcome barriers while working for social change? (*Including professional, movement, personal*)
6. What practices have allowed you to thrive in institutional spaces?
7. In what ways have you adapted to these spaces?

8. In what ways have you changed these spaces to make them work for you and others like you?
9. Do you have anything else you want me to know before we conclude?

## Participant Invitation Email

An email invite describing the project and the goals of the research will be sent to all potential participants.

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Zuri Tau and I'm reaching out to invite you to participate in my dissertation study on nonprofit leaders of color- tentatively titled: *Liberatory Consciousness in Contested Space: How nonprofit leaders of color decolonize their minds and change everything.*

The research questions for this study arose from my experiences working with nonprofit leaders of color as a program evaluator. Leaders like you expressed the dissonance they felt between their abilities and the resistance to their ideas and insights within their organizations. They also felt frustration with nonprofit institutions that mimicked dominant culture norms while professing equity-based values to the community.

In 1984, Audre Lorde declared, "If our history has taught us anything, it is that action for change directed only against the external conditions of our oppressions is not enough. In order to be whole, we must recognize the despair oppression plants within each of us." My dissertation will explore the processes by which you answer this call to wholeness.

If you are interested in joining my study, your participation will include scheduling a Zoom interview with me (60-90 minutes) and answering some questions which I will send you in advance to review. I will also ask you to send me some supporting documents that you deem

appropriate to provide examples of how you navigate oppressive practices or policies, shift organizational behavior, or advocate for yourself or others. And after the research is complete, you will receive a copy of the findings and an optional feedback form to share your thoughts on my conclusions.

If you would like to participate, please respond to this email and I will send you a link schedule our interview using Zoom.

## Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in this research study because you hold or have formerly held a leadership position in an established nonprofit that has a mission to benefit marginalized people, disenfranchised individuals and populations, including women, LGBTQ people, and BIPOC in the US; and because you identify as Black, indigenous, or as a person of color (BIPOC). The purpose of this research study is to learn more about the ways you navigate, transform, and survive being in leadership in nonprofit institutions.

If you agree to participate, I will ask you to schedule an interview with me, review and provide feedback on the proposed questions. This interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete, but the length will vary based on your circumstances. The interview will be conducted on Zoom and recorded to my local computer. Zoom is a service for making video or audio calls over an internet connection. A password will be required to access the room.

I will also ask you to submit supporting documents that you deem appropriate to provide examples of how you navigate oppressive practices or policies, shift organizational behavior, or advocate for yourself or others. These could include copies of policies that were proposed or blog posts for example.

Your responses to the interview questions and your supporting documents will help to answer the study's larger research questions:

1. How does institutional domination intersect with the resistance and ingenuity of nonprofit leaders of color?

2. What liberatory behaviors and mental processes do participants engage in to navigate institutional spaces, specifically nonprofit organizations; and
3. How do these leaders transform, struggle, and thrive in these spaces?

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life. I hope this interview will be a positive experience, however you will not benefit directly from this research study. Yet, there are societal benefits associated with your participation. The information you provide will contribute to the research and understanding of the experiences of social justice leaders and specifically, how social justice leaders of color shape institutions through intellectual production and liberatory projects.

I will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. While my data analysis may be shared with my dissertation committee, I will use a study ID number rather than your name on study records. Deirdre Oakley and Katie Acosta at Georgia State University and Margaret Post at Clark University are my committee members. Information (excluding your name) may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board). MaxQDA, a research tool specially designed to analyze non-numeric data, will be used to store all the information you provide. Password-and-firewall protected computers will be used to access all transcripts, recordings, and documents. You are also entitled to a copy of your transcript and audio recording.