Dignity and Justice

A Brown Paper on Humanizing the Workplace for BIWOC+

Report by Kaitlyn Ramirez Boryslewicz, Doris Nadine Quintanilla, & Ahmad Brown
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With support from

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In the wake of 2020’s racial uprisings, there was a moment of consensus rooted in a simple fact: Structures and institutions in the United States were designed to fail specific members of our society in destructive ways. This fact contained the truth that harm is weaved into this nation’s fabric.

For the first time in a long time, the realities of racial injustice took center stage in public conversation. While those of us who experience violence understood that these truths were not new, we hoped these conversations would have a normalizing effect, making it acceptable to name racism and oppression without consequence. This hope was something Black, Indigenous, and women of color (BIWOC+) have pushed for long before tragedy stirred others to action.

The workplace, especially progressive-leaning organizations in the social sector, was one space where these frank discussions occurred. Like falling dominos, organizations issued solidarity statements and committed to hire more people of color. Funders released resources, and a deluge of programs and events shed light on the intersecting nature of historic discrimination. Organizations started commemorating Indigenous Peoples’ Day, Juneteenth, and the like. It seemed like progress was being made. Maybe this time, the unseen fear, isolation, and demoralization BIWOC+ face in the workplace would be heard, uplifted, and respected.

But predictably, most of these efforts stayed on the surface. While progressive organizations worked double time to demonstrate commitments to change¹, women and queer, trans people of color saw that not much was shifting within internal policies and dynamics.² Statements, diversity hires, and anti-racist programming all felt performative. No one wanted to dive into the systems, policies, and practices that actually upheld oppression within the workplace.

At The Melanin Collective, we heard the anger and frustration firsthand. People of color, particularly BIWOC+ at all intersections of marginalized identities, told us about the unending emotional labor of educating colleagues, about being denied rest, undergoing health crises at work, and not being paid for diversity and equity assignments that were mysteriously tacked onto their positions. Our hearts hurt for the countless BIWOC+ who were holding the

*For definitions, see our glossary on page 36.
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experiences of racism and violence in the workplace directed toward BIWOC+. In our careful readings and analysis, we uncovered an opaque thread that wove the over 200 stories together: the need to belong and to be seen for our diverse and expansive identities.

In the pages that follow, we share four personal reflections grounded in the themes uncovered in the Racial Justice in the Workplace Survey. We shared our own in hopes of honoring the anonymity of the survey, in awe of how many shared experiences we had collected. While this is a starting point, we anticipate a larger project to come in conversation with our community.

You will also see key findings from the survey and recommendations for moving forward to build more just and safe workplaces. Stories drive social change, and we hope our visible narratives illuminate the systemic impact of white supremacy and oppression within progressive organizations. We all have stories to share – stories are what create strong movements that honor, uplift, and give space for BIWOC+ to thrive.

For our white colleagues reading this, we ask that you approach this brown paper with openness and the recognition that standing with progressive
movements and issues may not exclude you from exhibiting harmful behavior. Healing cannot happen without introspection. We hope this brown paper serves as a mirror for you to pause and reflect before moving into action.

**Finally, to the people who shared their stories:**

We thank you for the unapologetic brazenness, truth, and vulnerability shared in your responses to our Racial Justice in the Workplace Survey. In the darkest of times, you tapped into your lived experiences and made space to share them with us. We are forever grateful for your trust, honesty, and rawness around creating healthy and equitable workplaces for us. We yearn for a world that does not exist and recognize that together, we can build it.

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KEY FINDING

The Progressive Veil™

In their survey responses, numerous participants observed a stark contrast between organizations’ missions – openly cause-driven and justice-minded – and the reality of how those same organizations treated BIWOC+ staff.

We defined this dynamic as the **progressive veil™**: a condition that allows workplace violence to proliferate under the guise of a progressive organization’s outward reputation and status as self-appointed advocates working toward the common good to eradicate societal inequities. “They like to make a fuss about how they’re so progressive, but to be honest, they are mostly all white women who do not use an intersectional lens at all,” wrote one survey participant.
There is increasing scholarly evidence of what BIWOC+ and other traditionally marginalized people have known from their lived experiences for many years: People’s experiences of workplaces are shaped by their racial and gender identities (and the intersections there within). As the qualitative data from our Racial Justice in the Workplace Survey showed, there are significant barriers for BIWOC+ to experience belonging and inclusion in their workplaces. We know, however, that experiences of inequality and discrimination are not uniform among all BIWOC+; for example, the ways that inequality manifests in workplaces for Black women have been shown to differ from the ways that inequality manifests for Asian-American women.

In an attempt to understand differential experiences of inclusion by ethnic / racial identity among our survey participants, we collected data using an instrument that we refer to as The Inclusion Index.

For a full description, please see Appendix 1.
When children are asked to describe their aspirations, their answers are often framed as dreams: to be astronauts, marine biologists, detectives – not out of some nagging sense of obligation, but because they possess the imaginative freedom to set their hearts on a dream that exists inside themselves.

Some, unshackled from the realities of economic, geographic, social, and racial disenfranchisement, get to chase after those dreams. Others are not as lucky. In seeing (and sometimes living) the disparities that dampen the dreams of our families and wider communities, we commit ourselves to service, forgoing individual dreams so that maybe a collective dream can come true for people who look like us. We become destined to work for the social sector and its promise to create a better world for us all.

Doris’ father Ricardo – a blind, albino Salvadorian immigrant – worked for a nonprofit in Orange County, California, teaching English literacy to Latine immigrants. Supported by the Sisters of St. Joseph, the message to the immigrants in Orange County was clear. In order to succeed, one must assimilate – discounting the fact that many with limited English owned businesses, had families, survived in this new country, and succeeded in other ways. One of the nuns took a liking to Ricardo and she asked him to help teach English to the uninitiated. Their program was not working and they did not understand why. In order to learn a second language, Ricardo told them, “You must have a strong foundation in the first language.” He explained the cultural context of the Latine immigrant experience, where many would work at a young age to support their family or were unable to go to school because their family could not afford it. With this new foundational understanding provided by Ricardo, Proyecto Hispano de Alfabetización (the Hispanic Educational Literacy Project) began.

The second eldest of four children, Doris was raised in a two-parent household surrounded by radicals and revolutionaries. A self-described “red diaper baby,” she and her siblings heard about the civil war in El Salvador: the violence and what their responsibilities were as the ones who were not born into war. Her parents made clear to their children that they were not free unless their people were free. This sentiment set the stage for Doris to commit herself at an early age to sacrifice and service, even, as her parents reminded her, in the face of death. When she was 11 years old, she accompanied her father to work, watching him as he taught people to read and write in Spanish. Looking back, what she remembers the most are the students’ stories: stories of wanting to go to school but not being able to; stories of working as children to support their families in poverty; stories of how they ended up in a Spanish class in a monastery in Orange County after so many years of surviving. But while she looks back on her
experiences with her father fondly, it would take Doris a decade to realize that what was deeply moving and personal to her was just a playground – a hobby – for the white people she would work alongside with in nonprofit environments, a means for their white savior complex to feel absolved.

With a bachelor’s degree in international development, Doris jumped into the workforce ready to serve. Her first paid international opportunity was a six-month contract in the Dominican Republic where she would set up educational exchange programs for youth from the United States. She developed the program alongside Honey, a woman born and raised in the Dominican Republic. The two women bonded over their passion and commitment to youth education, even with paltry resources and little support from the nonprofit’s headquarters back in the United States. But Doris’ excitement waned as she observed her white colleagues putting down and dismissing Honey’s ideas and explanations. “You don’t know what you’re talking about; we understand the Dominican Republic, and this is what we’re going to do,” they would tell her – even though Honey was born in the Dominican Republic and was hired for her expertise in the region and her experience with its nongovernmental organizations. Doris sensed something was wrong. Why hire an expert and not listen to their recommendations? She would back her project co-lead up, doubling down to explain to her white colleagues why their requests would offend the community they worked in or would be dangerous for them as leads and the youth coming to this unfamiliar country. Undeterred, they ignored Doris as well.

Despite the nonprofit’s mission to cultivate service learning and leadership development to teach American youth to engage with the global community, red flags of bad behavior kept waving around Doris. One of the biggest arguments she had with management related to their request to send the youths on a motoconcho to explore sugar cane fields and rural communities. Honey, having been labeled “difficult,” stayed silent during the meeting but shared with Doris afterwards the dangers of that excursion. Motoconchos were already unsafe, but the region the management wanted the two women and the students to travel to was hazardous for

Sidenote: The Problem of White Saviorism

The progressive veil™ and the concept of white saviorism are deeply connected. While organizations within the social sector can have progressive visions, these aspirations can sometimes act as a barrier to organizational introspection. As survey respondents noted, having a progressive mission did not always guarantee that their white colleagues would treat them with dignity and respect. In fact, we submit that progressive personas and posturing may worsen interpersonal dynamics, particularly when white saviors are given leeway to justify abusive actions as necessary for achieving organizational goals. When considering an equitable workplace, we recommend organizations engage in conversations about what led them to their work, what their motivations are, and how power can impact external – and internal – efforts.
women in particular. “If we go, we could be robbed, raped, and potentially murdered,” she said. Doris took this information to her management, who responded by calling her lazy, uncooperative, and hyperbolic. But Doris knew that the U.S.-based organization relied on the two women’s labor, so instead of fighting them she invited the team to embark on the journey themselves – without Doris and Honey there for support. In the end, management relented and canceled the trip.

After this experience and several others that followed, Doris understood that many nonprofits in the social sector hide under a figurative progressive veil™ that uses aspirational missions and messaging as a shield against claims of bad behavior. “We can’t be bad; we’re creating impact for the world,” these organizations claimed. But for Doris, all she saw was a trail of harm created by her white colleagues who refused to relinquish their power to people who might actually know better, endangering her life, Honey’s life, and the lives of the youth they were hired to protect.

According to Tarana Burke, justice answers a straightforward question: What do people who have been harmed need to feel whole again? This question gives BIWOC+ the agency to decide what heals trauma. But we know healing cannot happen in isolation. There are individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels of healing that must all be addressed to build equitable work cultures.

Individual: According to the National Equity Project, individual healing is about committing to “an ongoing process of healing from personal harm and internalized oppression.” While unpacking past and present traumas is not a simple ask, starting with the self allows for deeper meaning-making, forgiveness, and agency.

Interpersonal: Healing also takes place between people. When we hold space to listen and be listened to without question, interruption, or judgment, we can build “relationships that support our continued healing.” Of course, this type of healing cannot exist without trust; organizations and the people within them must consider how to create such spaces to help people of marginalized backgrounds feel safe and secure. If this trust does not exist within the organization, hiring a skilled, external facilitator could help bridge communication.

Institutional: Institutional healing requires “an intentional, shared, and explicit commitment to creating a more loving, just, and resilient system.” Organizations have an imperative to review current procedures and policies to determine whether or not inequities are baked into the organization’s design. Policies that dismantle uneven power dynamics, hold oppressors accountable, and provide space for BIWOC+ to thrive are critical for building equitable workplace systems.
KEY FINDING

Intersections of Race and Gender

Intersectionality is a framework introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw that conceptualizes how race, class, gender, and other individual identities overlap with one another. While first applied to racial and sex discrimination that Crenshaw witnessed in the legal field, the principle of intersectionality has reached far and wide, from academic settings to everyday vernacular. In the workplace, the framework is particularly useful to describe experiences of discrimination, harassment, and violence faced by BIWOC+.

Survey respondents told us of feeling shamed or stigmatized when asking for accommodations that their white colleagues received without asking. They told us about being threatened, retaliated against, or even denied advancement – experiences that undoubtedly originate from the intersections of race and gender. As one respondent put it, “I am no less qualified than my white counterparts, even if I struggle to speak up in the same way as them. ... My appearance should not be a barrier to entry or growth.”
The provision of support for employees to succeed in their roles, the cultivation of work environments in which all team members are able to bring their talents and abilities to bear to achieve team and organizational goals, and the fostering of organizational and team cultures in which all team members can feel that they belong are bare minimum expectations for managers and their organizations. As our qualitative data showed, however, many of our survey participants did not consistently have these experiences.

To understand the extent to which our survey participants felt that their organizations treated them equitably by creating equitable and inclusive environments and providing them with basic resources and support for them to succeed, we included the Equity Index in the Racial Justice in the Workplace Survey.

For a full description, please see Appendix 1.
Violence is not easy to talk about. In progressive environments, violence can be even harder to address; it erodes the bright surfaces of equity-centered posturing. Many of the BIWOC+ we have spoken to over the years tell us similar stories of wanting to work for organizations that are doing some good for the communities that we represent and (at times) come from. What is altruism for our colleagues is personal for us, a way of leveraging our newly gained privileges.

In practice, the reality is not always roses. Honeymoon phases dissipate quickly. Once-kind colleagues and supervisors become nitpicky and watchful. Our mistakes are catastrophic, while others' errors are blips in the day. As we and many others have learned in our careers, intersections of gender and race often determine who is given protection and who is valued.

Kaitlyn noticed this bifurcation of treatment up close. As a marketing associate at a reproductive health nonprofit, she worked alongside a program associate to promote training sessions for health care practitioners. Claire* was a white women who used weaponized politeness to get ahead. She was charming, especially when she needed Kaitlyn’s help. Uncompleted project evaluations and reimbursement forms that sat on her desk for weeks and months found their way to Kaitlyn’s workspace, a pile on top of Kaitlyn’s already large to-do list. In spite of Claire’s obvious performance issues, she was praised (and eventually promoted). When a staff transition left Kaitlyn without a supervisor, Kaitlyn was forced to assume director-level responsibilities on top of Claire’s uncompleted work. Kaitlyn told the leadership team that she needed help to balance her plate. Instead of supporting her, the executive director put her on probation.

The message was clear. Support and praise were not for everyone in the workplace, and Kaitlyn’s livelihood and income were dangled in front of her for daring to ask for help. The violence that manifests through race and gender based double standards is something we have come to expect, but not something we must accept.

The bitter taste of one-way, duplicitous violence in progressive workplaces is wrapped up in a longer history of the racial anxiety white women have catalyzed in America. Their specific type of femininity – signified through the trope of white women as virtuous and innocent – ignites violence against those who are institutionally “othered” in American society. In other words, white women are not just shielded from bad behavior; they are the standard from which hostile behavior emanates. So when a woman of color tries to access behavior that is reserved for white women – as in the case

*The name in this reflection has been changed.
of Kaitlyn requesting help – double standards appear. BIWOC+ can rarely expect to be protected. They might even be reprimanded.

But how does this relate to progressive workplaces? As we have previously highlighted, mission-oriented nonprofits that posture about their social good have a keen interest in maintaining that bright chrysalis of saviorism. And white women are buttressed through performances of powerlessness, utilizing their historically given status as victims to benefit from bad behavior. Together, these dynamics work overtime to protect white women and to protect organizations against accusations of violence and harm toward non-white team members. It is the continuous dehumanizing of people of color at the expense of progressive missions.

Doris also saw these dynamics unfold firsthand. At several international development nonprofits, there was an unspoken understanding that because the organizations were based in the United States, staff had free range to do as they pleased in foreign countries because those countries so often needed their resources – a deeply problematic but common narrative in international development spaces, rooted in U.S.-centric lenses, imperialism, and colonization.

Those who have worked in international development know this familiar situation: white colleagues letting loose in different countries, which feeds into a widespread hookup culture that can exploit people of color. In one country where Doris worked, she learned that one of her colleagues, a white woman in her thirties, misused her power as an American to have a sexual affair with an adolescent volunteer who had just turned 18. Instead of issuing a steadfast rebuke, the organization stayed silent, preferring to avert their eyes rather than acknowledge that one of their leaders had grossly abused her power. Interpersonal violence goes beyond the colleagues we work with. Its impacts can extend to the progressive organization’s community partners and volunteers and even its mission and the people it serves. When reflecting on the intersections of gender and race, Doris concluded that if it had been her, she would have been punished for her actions.

In thinking about her experience at the reproductive health organization, Kaitlyn wondered if the executive director decided to punish her instead of Claire because Claire, a white woman, was protected against retaliation under the trope of white innocence. Kaitlyn followed the rules and did what she could in her given circumstances. But when push came to shove, an important lesson she learned was that it is hard to succeed when you are playing a game that was not designed for you to win.

**Sidenote: What We Mean by Violence**

In our reflections and analyses, we grappled with a question of language. As we read survey responses, talked about our own experiences, and outlined the bones of this brown paper, we realized that the term microaggression – which includes everything from color blindness to myths of meritocracy to pathologizing non-white values – was not sufficient to describe what BIWOC+ were going through. “There is nothing micro about this,” Ahmmad said throughout our conversations. Violence, on the other hand, describes not just the action itself, but also the long-lasting emotional, physical, and psychological impacts that BIWOC+ feel after harm has happened.
Questions for Conversation

• “The ‘Problem’ Woman of Colour in the Workplace,” developed by the Canada-based Centre for Community Organizations, is a helpful resource for understanding the common life cycle of BIWOC in nonprofit organizations. How does the experience of BIWOC compare to experiences of white people in your organization?

• Does your organization actively consider the dynamics in treatment that might exist in your workplace that are based on gender and race?

• Does your organization perpetuate double standards formally or informally between BIWOC and their white colleagues?

• Does your organization funnel resources toward professional development, coaching, and other types of training to help BIWOC identify their needs on their terms and strengthen their skills?
From the Survey:
“I have been shamed, retaliated against, told that I was being a primadonna when asking for the same work arrangements given to white colleagues.”

From the Survey:
“White women are prioritized, leaving me with few options.”

From the Survey:
“The privilege that comes from having a white voice is another thing. People listen instantly. Otherwise, you have to throw yourself at people to be heard.”
KEY FINDING

Class Background in the Workplace

Class identity may not be as visible as race or gender, but it has a strong influence on workplace norms. Stop and reflect. Are your organization’s salaries so low that employees from higher socioeconomic backgrounds can afford to “sacrifice” an income and still live well, while those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds need to work multiple jobs to afford their rent, bills, and food? Does your organization require college degrees for roles that may not need one? Does your organization assume employees can put up funds for travel and other expenses (and just wait to be reimbursed)?

The answers could elucidate the extent of classism in your organization. The imperative to address internal classism is even greater for progressive workplaces serving institutionally disenfranchised communities. While an organization’s rank and file may consist of BIWOC trying to advocate for their communities, it is the attitudes and norms of white leaders that become unspoken law for how people act, think, and are rewarded within the organization. As one respondent told us, “I was told that I needed to assimilate in order to appear professional.” The message is clear: BIWOC from nondominant class backgrounds are not welcomed for their differences.
The pressures that nonprofit organizations face to reduce overhead and team member wages and salaries has been well-documented. As our qualitative data suggested, however, many BIWOC employees of progressive organizations (the great majority of which were nonprofits) cited socioeconomic background as a barrier to experiencing inclusion and equity in their organizations. Although high wages and salaries, in and of themselves, are not sufficient to address years of structural economic inequality experienced by Black, Indigenous, and communities of color, ensuring internal and external pay equity among team members is an important place to start.

Notably, as indicated in Figure 3 above, 40% of respondents whose annual incomes were less than $50,000 identified as being at the managerial level or above in their organizations. This suggests that despite achieving career success and having responsibility for people and / or processes in their organizations, BIWOC may have salaries that are roughly at or below what MIT’s Living Wage Calculator deems to be a living wage for an adult without children.
Are we our ancestors’ wildest dreams? It would be a comforting notion, if not for the pressures that it puts on BIWOC+. That ever-present burden of lifting up ourselves – and the people around us – burrows in the backs of our minds: the advanced degree, the need to secure a high-paying job, and our duty to give back and show gratitude for what we’ve been able to accomplish. Is it for us? The burden grows even sharper across the layers of class.

While Doris and Kaitlyn grew up with different class experiences, there was still an underlying assumption in both of their upbringings that self-sacrifice was necessary for the collective – be it parents or extended family – to thrive.

When she was a child, Doris’ parents taught her that success means community has everything it needs – even if it means putting other peoples’ needs above your own. The money her parents made went to El Salvador, providing a five-bedroom house with a yard and fruit trees to her grandmother and cousins, while Doris’ three siblings and her parents shared a two-bedroom apartment with little space. Her cousins went to private schools and had tailored clothing and maids, while Doris filled in as a pseudo mother for her brother and sister as her own mother cleaned spacious mansions in Orange County and sold food to make ends meet on the weekends. The entrenched sense of responsibility to care for her community started young, as Doris explained, “That’s how I was destined for the nonprofit sector. I was set up to volunteer and work and sacrifice for over 20 years.”

Growing up, the only thing that Kaitlyn knew about money was that her family did not have it, though she later learned that this was not the entire truth. As her mother, who immigrated from the Philippines to the United States in her twenties, rose from executive assistant to senior vice president within a single organization, she secured her family’s status as middle class. But this mobility was unbeknownst to Kaitlyn, who saw the constant worries and arguments over finances as a sign her family was always struggling. She internalized a filial imperative to support her parents, a duty (familiar to many children of immigrants) that ultimately took precedence over advocating for herself against emotional violence from coworkers. “I had coworkers who called me stupid, some who yelled and threatened to get what they want. But I thought my parents were depending on me for my income,” she said. “I dealt with toxic situations more than I should have.”

The impacts of socioeconomic status are
Sidenote: Unspoken Values and Class at Work

Children from working-class backgrounds learn to respect directives and be responsive to the needs of others, while children from middle- and upper-class backgrounds are taught self-importance and individual entitlement. Because workplaces are designed to mirror upper-class behaviors and attitudes, we can imagine how people from less advantageous backgrounds are short-changed at work just for being from a lower socioeconomic class. Take speech, for example. While an upper-class individual might be praised for speaking out of turn, a lower-class individual might be reprimanded for not speaking enough. These differences in communication have no bearing on a person’s competency. But if workplaces are not actively thinking about class, it is easy to see how a difference can be internalized as a “personal” failure. In our aim to build more inclusive workplaces, we should remind ourselves of the external forces that contribute to how people show up at work, and beyond.

not limited to interpersonal family dynamics. Class manifests in how we present ourselves, how we talk, and the choices we make – all potential markers of difference in white-dominated workspaces. Most of us from less advantageous socioeconomic backgrounds are not finely tuned to these behavioral norms; they are only elucidated when we violate them. Kaitlyn recalls one of her former coworkers, a white woman from a prominent background, who ridiculed the types of wine Kaitlyn chose at staff gatherings and would correct her pronunciation of words like chorizo.

When Doris first moved to Washington, D.C., she remembered what it felt like to walk into office buildings and be mistaken for a cleaning lady – a stereotype that still lingers. During a break at a training she was facilitating, she watched as a white man came back into the training room with a full cup of coffee. The contents dripped on the concrete floor, but he ignored it and sat down. Almost immediately, Doris’ coworker handed her a fistful of napkins and asked Doris to wipe the floor for safety reasons, as if she was the only one capable of tidying up. Doris refused: “I know you’re not asking the only Latina, and lead facilitator, to clean up. We’re not stereotyping today,” Doris said to her colleague who seemed to think she was beneath cleaning up the mess.

In these stories, Doris and Kaitlyn both felt the pressure of underlying norms of assumed socioeconomic status in the workplace. Of course, when we think about the communities these progressive coworkers and organizations serve, it is fascinating to observe that BIWOC+ who lack generational wealth are still expected to behave like well-to-do white people. Whether progressives realize it or not, maintaining strict class-based rules (through perpetuation of stereotypes, mockery, and derision) is yet another method of signaling that non-white communities somehow have it wrong or are backwards.

A few weeks ago, Doris and Kaitlyn ruminated on the costs of working in the
nonprofit sector as two BIWOC+ latched to expectations of self-sacrifice. “There’s a sense of hopelessness. How can I uplift others if I can’t uplift myself?” Kaitlyn asked. Doris agreed, and also pointed to the alarming sense of urgency BIWOC+ from low socioeconomic status feel to support their figurative villages. We’re supporting communities. We’re supporting our families. We’re supporting our white colleagues who saddle us with additional labor. “I’ve thought about selling out so many times,” Kaitlyn said. But while we may be paid more, the transition from nonprofit to for-profit work does not guarantee more compassionate treatment. (This is one of the reasons we maintain that individual solutions cannot sustain larger shifts in workplace culture. BIWOC+ cannot girlboss their way into thriving, not when the very foundation of work is designed to oppress us.) If through this work, BIWOC+ cannot sustain themselves, their livelihoods, and the livelihoods of people around them, switching sectors seems like a natural conclusion. But then do we leave the sector under the leadership of white people who do not represent, or even understand, the communities they want to serve?

Questions for Conversation

- Does your organization **assume its staff members have the same cultural values** or perpetuate harmful stereotypes that demean certain demographic groups?
- Does your organization **create a sense of belonging or exclusion** based on one’s comfort with others or familiarity with professional or social environments?
- Do organizational gatherings **require certain types of etiquette or unwritten codes** of behavior that may affect a person’s inclusion or comfort?
- Are there **different rules, perks, and advantages** for those at differing levels of the organization?
From the Survey:
“My socioeconomic background is rooted in low-wealth communities, which I find is often looked down upon by my peers from wealthier backgrounds.”

From the Survey:
“It’s not ok to make fun or laugh because I don’t know certain American phrases/idioms/cultural markers.”

From the Survey:
“I was told that I needed to assimilate in order to appear professional.”

From the Survey:
“My office does not often hire people who are not from Ivy Leagues.”
Accountability should be a cornerstone – not an afterthought – of the processes that organizations undertake to heal and remedy inequities in the workplace. How is an issue defined, who defines it, and who determines what healing looks like? Grappling with these questions is central to understanding how accountability is (or is not) realized in the workplace. Not surprisingly, BIWOC are not usually centered in these considerations, even as organizations’ leaders turned to us for education and reassurance through 2020’s racial uprising.

Despite lip service toward diversity and inclusion, many respondents spoke of the push-and-pull between hiding and honoring their identities at work – a dynamic that could be intensified by the fact that organizations do not have the buttresses in place to support and honor BIWOC+’s humanity when harm occurs.
To understand which solutions our survey participants would like to see implemented in their workplaces, we asked participants to rank the 10 actions indicated in the above table from 1 to 10 in terms of usefulness (1 being the most useful). There was no single action that participants generally conceived to be more useful than others — the range of average usefulness of actions across participants was between 4.28 and 6.34.

Notably, however, two actions related to compensation ranked second and third in average usefulness among our participants. In concert with data from Figure 3, this suggests that progressive organizations could do well to examine and potentially update their compensation practices.
In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations were forced to contend with a duty of care they have toward employees. Before conversations about the great resignation, workplace environments commonly encouraged separation between our personal and work lives, splitting our internal and external selves. Professionalism standards dictated that bringing one’s personal baggage into the workplace was unacceptable: “If you are going to do your job well, you have to leave yourself behind.” This edict is well known to many BIWOC+; selfhood becomes weaponized against advancement opportunities. Thankfully, employers and organizations are beginning to understand that people cannot just shed their skins before going to work. In a capitalistic society where we spend most of our time working, people deserve to be respected and cared for. As the imperative for equity in the workplace becomes louder, so too do calls for greater accountability.

But as we know, awareness does not always translate to action toward fostering accountability. The opposite is more likely to be true: calls from people of color for accountability are often met with defensiveness and retaliation – means of saving face, performative allyship, and nonconsensual paternalism.

As we highlighted previously, progressive nonprofits with world-saving missions have an interest in maintaining their saviorism. To admit one’s wrongdoing would be to crack open that facade. This denial could look like shifting fault, refusing to acknowledge harm, or plain misremembering. Doris recalled a time when her executive director at a previous organization threw a deck of papers in her face in front of two other colleagues. Sensing the tension, Doris’ supervisor asked that the meeting stop before things escalated. But later, when asked to serve as a witness during human resources’ investigation, the supervisor denied that the incident even happened.

Kaitlyn also learned this lesson during a staff dinner. Wine flowed without an end and, as alcohol does, uncorked one of her colleagues’ inner prejudices. “I think Spanish and French are the most beautiful languages,” she declared. “Not at all like those Asian
countries. They all just sound like ching-chang-chong.” Snickers erupted and Kaitlyn slunk in her chair. As a child, she learned that her Filipino heritage was not something to be proud of. The hurtful comments from her colleague were a reminder of why she never learned her mother’s language: assimilation teaches us that it is better to remove one’s heritage than be a laughingstock. But the sense of humiliation and loss was profound – a reminder that Kaitlyn had to minimize herself in order to be accepted. When Kaitlyn brought up the incident to her supervisor, initial support waned into excuses. “I’m sure she didn’t mean it. She’s having a tough time at home.” Kaitlyn relented, dropping the experience in a jar of growing interpersonal workplace violence that would go unaddressed, but not unfelt.

But there are also the institutional means of skirting accountability. While few and far between, Doris and Kaitlyn had learned of organizations who were now requiring staff to sign nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) as a means of preventing staff from speaking publicly about workplace harassment and violence. In one instance, an executive director made NDAs a requirement after reducing one of his employee’s raise recommendations because she took medical leave. The greatest way to break trust is to make staff sign these types of documents as a starting point rather than take accountability for harmful actions, Doris said. It was one thing to financially punish his staff member for taking medical leave; it was a whole other thing to force her into silence. If staff cannot speak about their experiences, who will be able to advocate for them? Who or what will serve as a check and balance against workplace aggressors? And what can be said about an organization that funnels resources toward implementing punitive actions against staff, rather than fulfilling the organization’s mission?

The misalignment between external promises and internal practices is a problem of hypocrisy. If an organization cannot live its mission for its employees, how can it claim to do so for the larger community – particularly when it has a justice-oriented charge? We see this in reproductive rights organizations who do not provide reproductive and trans health care to employees. We see this in liberal think tanks writing reports on poverty who pay staff $24,000. We see this in labor organizations advocating for parental leave, while remaining rigid and unwelcome toward employees with their own families. This tug-of-war between promise and practice brews heartbreak for BIWOC+ employees who are doing the visible and unseen work to support organizations’ efforts toward social change. And as we saw in the responses and in our own reflections, heartbreak paves a road toward disillusionment. How can we fight tirelessly for the issues we care about when our workplaces are tearing us down? This tension is unsustainable and progressive organizations with snow capped leadership...
Moving Toward Healing

We constantly hear questions and demands for answers to these workplace issues for BIWOC+. The answer must be community led; not only is it up to those who have been harmed to say what they need to feel whole again, it is up to each community to build the world they want to see. Borrowing from Decolonizing Wealth’s seven steps to healing, we focused on represent, invest, and repair.13

**Represent:** The consequences that stem from a lack of workplace accountability do not exist in a vacuum and can impact everything from employee retention to relationships and team performance. Consider who is responsible for developing policies around accountability (if they exist). Are the policies punitive, or do they foster learning and growth?

**Invest:** Within the organization, invest intentionally and strategically in resources to create internal policies and practices that denounce abuse and encourage safety and support. Invest in the people who make up your organizations and lead the mission work. Invest in BIWOC+ holistically so that we can finally thrive.

**Repair:** Accountability is an ongoing process, and community is the answer. Continue to commit resources that transform conditions within the workplace that reinforce oppression and harm. Reflect on how your organization practices community accountability and how, as individual contributors and leaders, you uphold these values of truth, time, trust, and transformation. We caution that when leveraging the insights and ideas of BIWOC+ or other marginalized communities, do so recognizing that they do not owe you an education. In fact, organizations could consider compensating people from marginalized groups for this labor.
Final Thoughts

Everyone deserves to belong at work. Everyone deserves to be seen and respected for their whole selves, inclusive of all of their identities, visible and hidden. The problem, as seen in the data from our Racial Justice in the Workplace Survey, is that workplaces often encourage homogeneity, enforcing standards that prove too narrow for all to belong. Whether we are talking about implicit biases of professionalism or the characteristics of white supremacy culture, the ultimate intent is clear. Those who cannot fit into the neat hierarchies of whiteness, heteronormativity, or maleness are erased, based on racial, ethnic, gender, and other differences? From burnout and disengagement to physical and psychological harm, our normal modes of operating are not working. To bring justice and safety to the workplace, we need to reimagine our sense of belonging. Who is allowed to belong? What do we need to do to create a world where multiple worlds fit?

Critically, the solution to exclusion is not further homogenization. From the wealth of insights that respondents shared with us, we came away from the survey understanding their identities smoothed over. Against these hierarchies, identifiers such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, disability, and others not only create uneven outcomes for BIWOC+, but become entry points for violence.

What, then, are the consequences of our societal orientation to leave people behind? What are the visible and hidden consequences of workplace violence that smoothing over identities leads to competition, color blindness, erasure, and surface-level solutions. Identities matter, the respondents emphasized. While we may have different needs for thriving, we should embrace a shared empathy toward each other, an acknowledgment that difference does not wipe away the stakes we have in each other. That is how we all belong.

Sidenote: What is “Breaking”?

According to the Othering & Belonging Institute, one of the ways that power is maintained in society is through breaking. Breaking describes the fractured lines we create or maintain when our cultural or social orders propagate a fabricated notion of separateness between individuals and groups. Examples of “soft” breaking include creating hierarchies and beliefs around inferiority and superiority, limiting participation to certain individuals or groups, assigning roles with restricted access or opportunities, leveraging segregation as a strategy, and requiring individuals labeled as “other” to surrender their differences.
In conceiving this paper, we wanted to use methods that would honor the breadth and seriousness of the experiences that our survey participants shared and would allow us to tell BIWOC+ stories in a way that would be supportive of healing for the survey participants and for Doris and Kaitlyn, who are BIWOC+ and have experienced harm and trauma in several progressive workplaces over the past decade. To accomplish these goals, we used a novel multistage approach to reflect on and analyze the data from the Racial Justice in the Workplace Survey, creating the Cenui Methodology™, a research approach that uses stories to identify shared experiences among marginalized communities and emphasizes community building in solidarity in its output. A Nahuatl word meaning to go together or to fall together, Cenui is at the core of The Melanin Collective’s work. We believe collective action is what it takes to shift power dynamics and dismantle oppression. The Cenui Methodology™ and our work is meant to help our communities walk together towards a better future for us all.

Released on July 9, 2020, the Racial Justice in the Workplace Survey remained open until April 2021. The survey was open to any BIWOC+ employed at a progressive, mission-driven organization, which we define as explicitly aligning itself with progressive politics or having some mission-oriented and/or social justice angle to their work. In total, 481 participants began the survey, providing basic information about their identities and backgrounds, including gender identity, racial and ethnic identity, and disability status. After providing these data, participants were asked to describe the type of progressive organization they work for. Out of 226 participants who answered this question, 157 responded that they work for a nonprofit and 69 reported that they work for a for-profit organization.

We collected two types of data with the survey:

1. **Quantitative data** from survey items that assessed participants’ feelings of belonging and inclusion in their workplace, the extent to which participants experience fair treatment in the workplace, and the extent to which respondents feel that their organizations are accountable to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) tenets and best practices.

2. **Open-ended qualitative data** from prompts asking participants to elaborate on their quantitative responses in several sections of the survey and from a final open-ended question asking participants to share anything that they had not yet mentioned in the survey about their experience working in progressive organizations.

One key limitation of our data comes from gaps in representation, such as voices from Indigenous or Two Spirit communities and transgender folks of color. In future versions of this work, connecting with and amplifying the experiences of even more communities will be a crucial component of painting the workplace landscape.
When Doris and Kaitlyn initially reviewed the qualitative data from the Racial Justice in the Workplace Survey, the richness and intensity of the data were apparent. As BIWOC+ who have worked in progressive environments, they found participants’ experiences both familiar and triggering. It became abundantly clear that the survey data could not be analyzed dispassionately and without meaningful reflection. Shortly thereafter, Doris and Kaitlyn reached out to Ahmmad, a fellow DEIJ practitioner with whom Doris had worked, who is trained in qualitative research and data collection and analysis. To support Doris and Kaitlyn’s research goals, Ahmmad recommended a collaborative autoethnographic approach to reflect on the themes that were apparent in the open-ended qualitative data.

Defined as a process in which multiple researchers share and document their reflections and stories in relation to a particular experience or phenomenon, collaborative autoethnography is a technique that allows for reflection and deeper learning among researchers during the research process and for community building between researchers and research participants.

Ahmmad, in collaboration with Doris and Kaitlyn, designed a research process in which each of them would individually review the open-ended qualitative data from the survey and identify key themes. After the individual reviews, Ahmmad, Doris, and Kaitlyn met to compare their themes, and they identified four themes that each of them found present in the qualitative data:
1. The presence of a progressive veil™, in which workplace violence in progressive organizations proliferates but is hidden by the organization’s reputation and status as self-appointed advocates working toward the common good to eradicate societal inequities.

2. The intersection of race and gender identity for BIWOC+ as a means by which BIWOC uniquely experience discrimination, harassment, and violence in the workplace based on their identities or perceived identities.

3. The importance of class background in the workplace in hiring and advancement processes, and the experience (or lack thereof) of belonging and inclusion in the workplace, which can exacerbate harm and violence experienced by BIWOC+.

4. The hypocrisy of accountability™ in which progressive organizations virtue signal their commitment to DEIJ without demonstrating real commitment, taking actions to effect structural change in the organization, or holding accountable those who (intentionally or unintentionally) cause harm in the organization.

We then held a series of meetings to discuss Doris and Kaitlyn’s personal experiences in progressive workplaces in relation to each of the four themes. We had four meetings – one for each theme – that lasted between 90 and 120 minutes each. These meetings involved Ahmmad asking Doris and Kaitlyn pre-prepared questions about their experiences in progressive workplaces in relation to the theme begging discussed, then facilitating dialogue between Doris and Kaitlyn to further understand their experiences. Each session was recorded, and Ahmmad sent Doris and Kaitlyn his reflections on the conversation at the conclusion of each session. Kaitlyn and Doris then cowrote personal reflections associated with each of these themes.

Sidenote: The Power of Stories

In Indigenous cultures, storytelling is an oral tradition passed down from generation to generation to share about our culture, values, and histories. Growing up, Doris’s mother would share Salvadoran folklore such as El Cipitio (the boy with his feet on backwards who lives in el campo, eats ashes, and takes misbehaving children from their families) and La Siguanaba (a beautiful women who would entice drunks walking home late at night but not before transforming her face into a horse and dragging men off to the abyss never to be seen again).

While these bedtime stories contained lessons in how to behave, they also taught Doris a compelling lesson about the power of storytelling. More than a collection of words, stories can help shift perceptions and develop counter-narratives of existing, potentially harmful, frames. The FrameWorks Institute’s report on The Features of Narratives offers readers a helpful guide into how stories are used for social change efforts.
Appendix 1: Figure Descriptions

Figure 1: Average “Inclusion Index” by Ethnicity and Race

There is increasing scholarly evidence of what BIWOC+ and other traditionally marginalized people have known from their lived experiences for many years: People’s experiences of workplaces are shaped by their racial and gender identities (and the intersections there within). As the qualitative data from our Racial Justice in the Workplace Survey showed, there are significant barriers for BIWOC+ to experience belonging and inclusion in their workplaces. We know, however, that experiences of inequality and discrimination are not uniform among all BIWOC+; for example, the ways that inequality manifests in workplaces for Black women have been shown to differ from the ways that inequality manifests for Asian-American women.

In an attempt to understand differential experiences of inclusion by ethnic / racial identity among our survey participants, we collected data using an instrument that we refer to as The Inclusion Index (the index’s Cronbach’s Alpha for our sample was .88, which suggests the instrument’s items are reliable). The Inclusion Index includes six statements in reference to respondents’ workplaces:

- I feel valued as an individual
- I am treated with respect
- I feel included and welcomed
- I have the same opportunities to perform up to my full potential as everyone else
- My opinions and views are valued.
- I feel pride in my job

Survey participants responded to these statements by selecting one of four options, which we coded on a 1 to 4 scale:

- Never (coded as 1)
- Rarely (coded as 2)
- Sometimes (coded as 3)
- Often (coded as 4)

Taking each participants’ responses to the instrument in aggregate, each respondent could have an Inclusion Index between 6 (the respondent selects “Never” for each item”) and 24 (the respondent selects “Often” for each item). Figure 1 above aggregates the average Inclusion Index for survey participants by ethnicity / race.

Overall, survey participants’ Inclusion Index was just below 18 (17.44) meaning that on average, our respondents responded to the Inclusion Index items with “Sometimes,” which comports with the survey’s qualitative data that suggest there is room for improvement among progressive organizations to foster inclusive environments for BIWOC+. Perhaps more notably, there were no statistically significant differences in Inclusion Index scores between survey participants of different ethnicities / races. This suggests that while the way in which inequality manifests for BIWOC+ can differ by ethnic or racial identity, the impact on the felt experience of inclusion (or lack thereof) among BIWOC+ is potentially similar across ethnicity and race.
The provision of support for employees to succeed in their roles, the cultivation of work environments in which all team members are able to bring their talents and abilities to bear to achieve team and organizational goals, and the fostering of organizational and team cultures in which all team members can feel that they belong are bare minimum expectations for managers and their organizations. As our qualitative data showed, however, many of our survey participants did not consistently have these experiences.

To understand the extent to which our survey participants felt that their organizations treated them equitably by creating equitable and inclusive environments and providing them with basic resources and support for them to succeed, we included the Equity Index in the Racial Justice in the Workplace Survey (the index’s Cronbach’s Alpha for our sample was .77, which suggests the instrument’s items are generally reliable). The Support at Work Index includes seven statements in reference to respondents’ workplaces:

- I don’t have the same opportunities to perform up to my full potential as everyone else
- I don’t have a voice in the decisions that affect me and my work.
- I have to cover up some aspects of my identity
- I am held to a different standard than everyone else
- I codeswitch at work
- I experience microaggressions based on my identity
- I am asked to speak for my race or a demographic I represent

Survey participants responded to these statements by selecting one of four options, which we coded on a 1 to 4 scale:

- Never (coded as 1)
- Rarely (coded as 2)
- Sometimes (coded as 3)
- Often (coded as 4)

Taking each participants’ responses to the instrument in aggregate, each respondent could have an Equity Index between 7 (the respondent selects “Never” for each item”) and 28 (the respondent selects “Often” for each item). Figure 1 above aggregates the Equity Index for survey participants by ethnicity / race.

Because the Equity Index’s items are framed negatively, higher scores on the Equity Index indicate more negative experiences. Overall, survey participants’ Equity Index was nearly 21 (20.34) meaning that on average, our respondents responded to the Equity Index items with “Sometimes,” which suggests that survey respondents experience inequities (as defined by the items in the Equity Index) with a degree of frequency. As with the Inclusion Index (see Figure 1), there were no statistically significant differences in Equity Index scores between survey participants of different ethnicities / races.

Figure 5, 6. Respondent Demographics

Data from the Racial Justice in the Workplace Survey were collected using a convenience sample (the sample was not randomly selected). However, the survey’s respondents include a diverse array of voice in terms of geographic location (survey participants hailed from 33 states), career experience levels (roughly half of the survey participants were entry-level or pre-managerial level, and a little more than half survey respondents were manager-level and above), and job industry (see the figure above). In turn, the data from the survey provide directional insights about the experiences of BIWOC+ in a variety of work settings.¹⁸
Appendix 2: Ethnicity/Race Categories

For the Census, The U.S. Office of Management and Budget requires race data be collected on the following categories: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. As we constructed our survey tool, we realized these general categories were not sufficient for capturing the fullest range of identities and experiences in the workplace. To that end, we included a field that allowed participants to self-report their ethnic and racial identities, which are collated in the list below.
BIWOC+: While language is not perfect, we aim to be inclusive in our definitions, realizing that we cannot capture the fullest range of identity in a single word or phrase; BIWOC stands for Black, indigenous, and women of color. We define women of color as women of Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latine, Middle Eastern, multiracial, or Pacific Island descent. We include the “+” to be inclusive of different gender identities.

**Classism**: differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class; the systematic oppression of subordinated class groups to strengthen the dominant class groups.

**Decolonization**: a form of bottom-up disobedience that revives Indigenous ideas and lived experiences to challenge the impact of historical colonization and reverse its trajectory.

**Discrimination**: the unfair or prejudicial treatment of people and groups based on characteristics such as race, gender, age or sexual orientation.

**Equity**: the state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair; true equity expresses that individual may need to experience or receive something different in order to maintain fairness and access.

**Internalization**: the nonconscious mental process by which the characteristics, beliefs, feelings, or attitudes of other individuals or groups are assimilated into the self and adopted as one’s own.

**Intersectionality**: the theory — conceptualized in the 1980s by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw — that markers of identity do not act independently of one another, but exist simultaneously, creating a complex web of privilege and oppression.

**Microaggression**: the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target individuals upon their marginalized group membership.

**Nonbinary**: an adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman.

**Progressive Organization**: organizations that align themselves with progressive politics and/or have a mission that expresses a commitment to social justice and equity.

**Progressive Veil™**: a condition that allows workplace violence to proliferate under the guise of a progressive organization’s front-facing reputation and status as self-appointed advocates working towards the common good to eradicate societal inequities.

**Queer**: a term people often use to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream; often used as a catch-all to include many people, including those who do not identify as exclusively straight and/or folks who have non-binary or gender-expansive identities.
**QTPOC**: an abbreviation for Queer and Trans People of Color and Queer and Trans Women of Color.

**Racial Injustice**: systematic mistreatment of people of color that results in inequitable outcomes and opportunities.

**Racial Trauma**: refers to the mental and emotional injury caused by encounters with racial bias and ethnic discrimination, racism, and hate crimes.

**Racism**: a system of power hierarchies that benefits white people and harms people of color; can exist on individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels.

**Western-centrism/U.S.-centrism**: the belief that the values, standards, and norms of Western/U.S. society are superior to those of other cultures.

**White Feminism**: an ideology that prioritizes the advocacy and empowerment of white, heterosexual, and cisgender women.

**White Saviorism/White Savior Complex**: an ideology that is acted upon when a white person, from a position of superiority, attempts to help or rescue a person of color or their community without considering the wants and needs of the community.

**White Supremacy**: a term used to characterize various belief systems central to which are one or more of the following key tenets: 1) whites should have dominance over people of other backgrounds, especially where they may co-exist; 2) whites should live by themselves in a whites-only society; 3) white people have their own “culture” that is superior to other cultures; 4) white people are genetically superior to other people.
Acknowledgments and Endnotes

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Lastly, we would like to thank our funders – just kidding. This project was self-funded. The Melanin Collective was founded in 2017 as a two-person startup. We quickly realized that we needed funding to make this work sustainable, yet after spending countless hours writing proposals and answering questionnaires, funders kept coming back to us saying that they did not understand why this work mattered. Fast-forward only a few years, and it has become increasingly popular (and rightfully so) to fund efforts focused on racial equity and justice. However, we believe this work should not just be resourced on the whims and decisions of those who manage stolen wealth. We encourage funders and other practitioners with the means to support on-the-ground, community-oriented work to listen to the needs of said communities and let us decide what matters for collective thriving and when.

Report design provided by Kaitlyn Ramirez Borysiewicz. Loving communications support provided by La Libertad Consulting, LLC. Copyediting provided by Managed Editing.
Endnotes


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.


11 MIT's Living Wage Calculator reports living wage data based on hourly wages. The Living Wage Calculator’s living wage for an adult without children is $23.13. Based on a full-time schedule (2,080 hours of work per year), the annual living wage for an adult without children is $48,110.


17 Intersectionality: Connecting experiences of gender with race at work, Research in Organizational Behavior, 2018, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191308518300121?casa_token=ktEQwRMBOAQQAAA:xjn7VwctKb_V7xRSD-P7UYld0VobacNqZ8-49BhCsGiCxbcWw8ajyfkcPtxXVbSE2YDxGuT5qSQ.

18 We can provide additional descriptive statistics about our sample upon request (hello@themelanincollective.org).
