

Transformative Organizing: Putting Culture at the Center

by Denise Perry

When I was the director of an organization that worked with Black and Latino youth in Miami, I noticed that music helped create a form of communication that fostered both a strong cultural and organizational identity. The youth members used it to entertain and to raise money with talent shows, but they were moved to a deeper interest in their organizing work when the hip-hop duo Rebel Diaz came to talk with them about the power and meaning inherent in their music.

Our organization always used live music to help connect us with the community and to project our values through a culture-rich identity. One staff member described what we were doing as “edutainment,” the opportunity to deliver a message in music that feeds both the mind and soul. The music opened up pathways to introducing these young people to other forms of culture; some they understood as their own and others that helped them to better know themselves. Our organization exposed the youth to *capoeira* as a way to provide education about their roots, its use as a form of resistance, and as exercise to improve their health. Capoeira didn’t become a personal cultural practice for everyone, but it served to increase the consciousness and imagination of the youth, many of whom engage with it as inspiration in their ongoing campaign to stop the suspension and arrest of other young people in the community.

Getting foundation support for our cultural work was often difficult. More often than not, foundations wanted to see measurable results, a transactional product that we could point to. Despite this demand, our organization and many others like us have not abandoned the values that come with genuine attention to cultural practice. Our communities are shaped by structural racism and other oppressive elements that function to shut down our youth and keep them from the full expression of their potential. But our communities are also resilient places and culture remains a force by which our youth can learn to stand tall, and in so doing, inspire a collective identity and spirit to organize. In order for organizing to develop and thrive among developing young activists, we must support a

cultural practice that validates who they are and what they are capable of doing.

And so it is crucial to recognize and build on community strengths like the important role played by family, cultural events, sports, and places such as schools, parks and Black churches. These communal expressions are affirmations of cultural norms that shape and define our relationships, provide comfort, familiarity and even resistance.

But why consider culture in the context of our already complicated organizing efforts? Because in order for our work to be *transformative*, it must do more than just speak to people’s material needs. The central proposition of transformative organizing is that personal and societal transformations are inextricably linked – that it is impossible to achieve one without the other. Culture is a powerful force that is shaped by and shapes both the individual and society; and culture can aid in organizing the transformation of both.

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To transform is to create an alternative, to change something into a different shape, into something new and hopefully much better. At a macro level, organizers struggle to transform a world that has been shaped by dominant groups. For many people of color, living in that dominant culture means adapting to something that marginalizes one’s cultural existence; and a people who don’t know themselves will seldom find what sustains the long struggle necessary to win.

For years, many seasoned organizers and leaders have wondered why there has been so little progress in

developing Black leaders of organizations. To this day, most community organizations are White-led, often leaving African American staff and community members feeling disconnected and inadequate. While these organizations may succeed in achieving short-term transactional goals, they usually don't build the kind of culture and leadership needed to genuinely challenge structural racism over the long haul.

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Inherent in this analysis is a struggle for cultural authenticity in the organizing process. Without negating their contributions in organizations made up of people of color, White leaders and allies do not have the authentic connections to the culture of the communities in which they work. And often for communities of color, the impact of such leadership hierarchy can be seen in feelings of insufficiency within White-led organizations. This is often the case, of course, even though White leaders are as committed to the desired outcomes of combating structural racism as anyone. We have to be able to build functional, competent organizations that invest in and support leadership from the community – organizations that, in short, operate in the cultural context of our communities. We do know that shared culture connects a group of people through what many would define as their roots or identity. Malcolm X stressed that the real return to our roots does not mean physical return, but a “return culturally, psychologically and spiritually.” Such a recovery of culture, Malcolm explained, would deepen the kinds of values that aid in revolutionary struggle. Once people are clear about who they are, they understand that a shared cultural value system roots them to a position from which to build. This view of culture provided sustenance and resilience for individuals in the Black Liberation, Chicano, Women's Rights and many other movements. Two generations later, organizers of color are still looking to culture to build solidarity and power.

And there are positive signs. An especially enriching part of my current work is with the Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity (BOLD) project, a national effort to create a leadership development pipeline that will increase the skill level and number of Black organizers and directors working

for social change in the U.S.¹ Our aspiration for BOLD is to build a long-term project that can play a concrete and catalytic role in supporting the development of these leaders and organizations within the Black community, creating a shared, trusted cultural space to work together to address the challenges facing working-class Black communities and the broader social justice movement.

The process of organizing with culture starts with identifying how people and communities respond to the pressures they face, how they unfold the pieces necessary to confront the dominant culture around them, and how they build the structures and interrelationships that provide communities of color with the resiliency to overcome. In my current work with BOLD, we ask people what gives them strength and resiliency; and what we hear are quick responses about things like singing, music, even a special meal. We encourage people to tap into these as a grounding force when they feel they are being pushed off course.

How could foundations navigate their role in this paradigm? For starters, by not dismissing the importance of how cultural values can help shape an organization's priorities – values that don't view the number of dues-paying members as more important than the kinds of relationships that are being developed, or more important than the consciousness-building work being done through collective study and political education. And, of course, there are other, specific ways foundations can help:

1. Recognize that cultural development within an organization builds culturally-competent, political and skill development that increases capacity and campaign effectiveness.
2. Trust the knowledge and experience of grantee organizations. Foundations should not and cannot define which cultural practices are used or the value of their use within an organization or campaign. Foundations rarely do this explicitly; however, by designing initiatives or criteria that does not recognize or understand culture, foundations often place limits on support that could otherwise be used to help an organization flourish.
3. Support the development and hiring of local leaders who bring cultural knowledge, practice and desire to see change happen. This includes investment in the development of every position: organizers, administrators, directors, cultural workers, communication specialists and healers. Finally, this includes the investment in organizational transitions that can be a long process.

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4. Provide multiyear resources and time frames that allow organizations to develop strategies and tactics that are culturally specific to their community, constituents and targets. One-year funding is an impediment for organizations as what actually gets done in this timeframe is neither transformative nor sustainable.

Slavery was predicated on stripping people of who they were at every level: human beings were denied their language, food, spiritual practices, homes and land, and any expressions of celebration and knowledge of their history. What the oppressor understood was that the defining feature of a nation or a people was its culture. The history of resistance demonstrates clearly that in order for a people to be free, they must be self-conscious, self-determining, and rooted in their own culture and creativity. Their liberation depends on waging cultural revolution,

thus producing a radical transformation of both self and society. This is a lesson taught to us by those young people who by using their music and dance, including capoeira, deepened their commitment to transformational change. Some of them now serve on the board or work as full-time organizers in that former organization of mine. All of them continue to touch the lives of others for good.

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¹BOLD is a national training program developed through a collaboration between the Center for Third World Organizing and Social Justice Leadership. The program is designed to help rebuild Black (African American, Caribbean, African, Afro-Latino) social justice infrastructure in order to organize Black communities more effectively and re-center Black leadership in the U.S. social justice movement.