

FALL 2024

# OUR STORY

## Weaving Reparative Futures

The Power of Returning Resources to Black & Indigenous Women

Bernier McCaw  
Foundation

Black Ivy  
Collective



HEADWATER PEOPLE  
For the common good

# 01. Introduction

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This report is a testament to the power of story—stories that are not always perfect but are always real, reflecting our hard, messy, and beautiful journeys. It is through these stories that we find the wisdom to guide our work and inspire change.

The cohort, bound by love and nurtured by the facilitator, embarked on a transformative and unknown journey. The Threshold Philanthropy staff, driven by curiosity and a commitment to doing things differently, created a space where hope could flourish. Their dedication to shifting the status quo in philanthropic work was palpable, sparking a collective desire for relational reparations and deep systemic change.

This reflection process has profoundly impacted the staff at Headwaters People, who facilitated the gathering of these stories—an undertaking that some may call evaluation. To us, it is much more: it is a gift to the participants, affirming that their journeys are invaluable to the ongoing work of reparative relationships within and beyond philanthropic endeavors.

We were able to gather these stories into a woven basket, held with much care. The stories, cradled within the walls of these woven fibers, guide this reflection through the past, present, and future. This process has not only gathered data but has also held space for the emotions, challenges, and triumphs experienced by the cohort. This work was made possible through the support of the Bernier McCaw Foundation along with Black Ivy Collective, whose commitment to understanding relational repair and ensuring these stories are

shared has guided this report.

Within these pages, we celebrate the moments where hope was realized and acknowledge the challenges that were also a part of this process. By embracing these learnings, we aim to foster more reparative work, building on our growth and striving for a future where philanthropy is more just, equitable, and compassionate.

In sharing these stories, we honor the experiences of the cohort and the vision of the funders. We invite you, the reader, to engage with these narratives, to find reflections of your own journey, and to join us in imagining and creating a better, more caring world.

That first earth gift of breathing. Open your body,  
these lungs, this heart. Gave birth to the ability  
to interact. With dreaming. You are a story fed  
by generations. You carry songs of grief, triumph.  
Thankfulness and joy. Feel their power and they  
ascend. Within you. As you walk, run swiftly, even fly.  
Into infinite possibility.

*-Joy Harjo, "Prepare"*

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## 02. Origin Story:

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# Developing the Liberated Leadership Cohort

Threshold Philanthropy was born from a deep curiosity and a desire to experiment with new models in philanthropy. Threshold Philanthropy was created when a white-bodied woman (founding funder) reached out to her dear friend and colleague in philanthropy, a Black woman and also to a second Black woman who was also a peer in philanthropy to create the giving organization of their dreams. There was no endowment or family office, the white woman was funding directly from her family's wealth with the two Black women empowered as co-Chief Executive Officers (co-CEOs) with the freedom to create what felt right and true to them. This alone is radical and transformative within approaches to philanthropy.

Of course, the founding co-CEOs were not satisfied with their own empowerment, they fiercely pursued models of giving that would foster liberation for other women of color. They came to Threshold Philanthropy with a vision to direct funding to individuals in addition to organizations, something that rarely happens in philanthropy. Threshold Philanthropy staff spent several months interviewing Black & Indigenous women, leaders in grassroots community organizations, philanthropy, academia, the arts and nonprofits. The interviews affirmed the need to care for the people who care for our communities. The interviews revealed the psychological, physical, emotional and financial toll that leadership and working as a change maker takes on Black & Indigenous women. In an organic process, Threshold Philanthropy staff decided to invite some of the women they interviewed to participate in a "financial return" in which they would receive a significant financial distribution in a way to honor both their cultural lineage as well as their present-day leadership.



Threshold Philanthropy provided these funds with no strings attached, granting cohort members the freedom to use the money as they needed. The vision was to support these leaders as individual human beings inherently worthy of care and support. The cohort members saw themselves as the beginning of a larger movement, one in which more funds would flow to Black and Indigenous people in the U.S. Although Threshold Philanthropy has since closed, the experience offers valuable reflections for other organizations grappling with questions around reparations, returning resources to Black & Indigenous communities and directing funding to individuals.

Cohort members had the flexibility to receive the funds in a way that best suited their needs—whether taking the entire amount upfront, or splitting disbursements throughout the year. After the first distribution of funds had some unintended consequences such as impacting financial aid for some of the children of recipients, Threshold Philanthropy decided to take a different approach with the following rounds of fund distribution. Recipients could choose to direct the final payment toward specific expenses, such as tuition for their children. This approach was intended to ensure that cohort participants weren't adversely affected by taxes or financial aid implications.

In addition to receiving a financial return, the women were also invited to participate in the Liberated Leadership Cohort which would bring together all of the 6 recipients to create a circle of healing and learning. The cohort was facilitated by an external consultant who contracted with Threshold Philanthropy but was given a high amount of autonomy to facilitate the cohort. The 6 participants were also invited to co-create the cohort space according to their needs.

There was not a blueprint or established plan/curriculum for the cohort when the 6 recipients were first brought together. This was a space of messy play, of trying things out. Cohort members met together monthly on Zoom calls but also shared space in-person through retreats.

We also recognize that many past philanthropic endeavors have often been unhealthy for Black and Indigenous people. Acknowledging the trauma and generational strengths within these communities, we consider how these experiences influenced the use of the money and the weight of holding it. We examine the present, reflecting on how the funds impacted daily life, the safety required for this work (both internal and external), lateral violence, the potential loss of other philanthropic support for those in the non-profit sector, and the unforeseen stressors, as well as the relief and liberation, that came from receiving these funds.





# Why Black & Indigenous?

*At first, there were tensions, but as we opened up and shared our histories and cultures, we found strength in our intersections. It was a beautiful and healing experience.*

-Liberated Leadership Cohort Participant

The legacy of slavery, redlining, Jim Crow laws, forced removal, assimilation, broken promises, and systematic erasure as well as continued structural racism all work to harm Black and Indigenous communities - on spiritual, physical, psychological, and financial levels.

These shared inequities provide a powerful foundation for solidarity. Recognizing this and creating space for both stories to be represented, Threshold Philanthropy originally included five members in the cohort—three Black community leaders and two Indigenous leaders. However, in the spirit of shifting and reimagining possibilities, they added another Indigenous leader to the cohort, enriching the experience. Economic inequalities are not just statistics; they reflect deep, systemic racism and historical traumas that have shaped the lived experiences of Black and Indigenous communities. Yet, within the cohort, these shared struggles became a source of connection and empowerment.

The cohort recognized the wealth within their different yet similar stories. Seeing the intersections and the power and strength together, the cohort's relationships between Black and Indigenous communities were seen as a great gift.



## 03. Our Evaluation Process

### **Methodology of Our Work**

We incorporate the Indigenous concept of the seven generations, where the three generations before us guide our actions now, and we live for the benefit of the three generations to come. These Indigenous ways of thinking help guide our work, ensuring that it is deeply rooted in respect for both our ancestors and future descendants. This guided us to emphasize the importance of looking back to make our way forward. Our process was not about creating a map but about fostering curiosity and imagination for those engaging in this type of work. We aimed to create a methodology that allowed for shifts and changes, representing that no work is truly perfect.

### **Our Process**

We at Headwaters People were guided by the spirit of Threshold Philanthropy and the bravery of the cohort to do things differently. Our process involved multiple layers of engagement to deeply reflect on the past, present, and future. Within these gatherings, we cultivated space for story and journey.

## 1. Collective Reflection

We met over a series of three monthly meetings that served as focus groups/facilitated group reflections

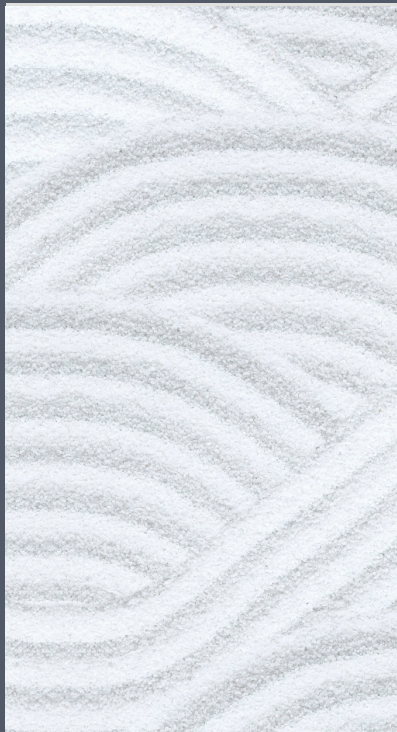
Each meeting focused on different aspects of the cohort's experiences, fostering a sense of community and shared learning.

During one group session, participants were asked to write letters to an ancestor about their time in the cohort, reflecting on their expectations versus their actual experiences.

These reflections included what wisdom or lessons they drew from their ancestors and what they would tell these ancestors about their journey.

We also explored future aspirations by asking participants to imagine themselves as ancestors and consider what future generations would gain from their experiences.

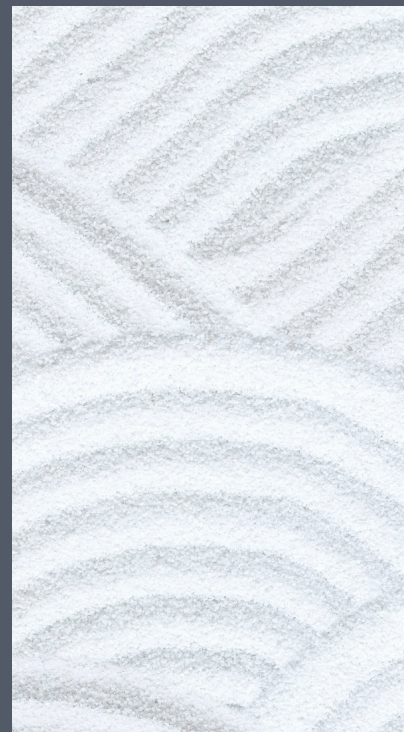
Questions focused on the impact of their current work on future generations and their hopes for the cohort's legacy.



## 2. One-on-One Interviews

These were hour-long sessions designed to provide a space for individual reflection and deeper conversation around their individual journeys.

We asked questions about their family histories, personal and professional journeys, as well as their relationship to the money received.



## 3. Gifts and Reflections

Prior to the first meeting, we sent gifts made by Black and Indigenous artists and earth workers to the cohort members. This pottery, symbolized nourishment and the connection to roots.

The gifts served as a tangible reflection point for the cohort members to consider what was nourishing, what was good, and what they were still thirsty for and what flavor they brought to the cohort.



**A big part of our process was respecting the voices and needs of participants. Inviting them to co-create our research design process and regularly checking in with them throughout the journey together.**

**We did this in recognition of the vulnerability and trust that is required to share something as intimate as story, especially about money. We also know how many attacks there have been and still are on the stories of Black and Indigenous women (think recent book bans & anti-CRT).**

## 04. Common Threads: Reflections for the Liberated Leaders

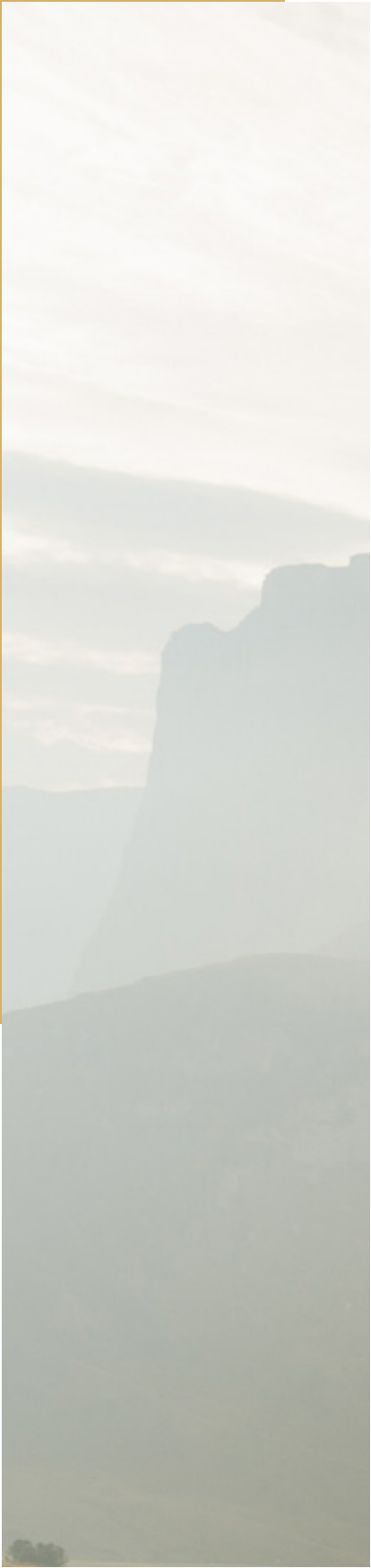
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### Curiosity & Risk Taking

Threshold Philanthropy's Liberated Leadership cohort was developed from a heartfelt desire on the part of the funders to "try something out", exploring reparative models for philanthropy. The cohort started not with a hypothesis or a pilot model they wanted to prove as successful - it started with questions and curiosity. They started by interviewing women of color change makers, asking them about their experiences and their needs. Those conversations sparked further curiosity about what would happen if they connected these women together in a cohort of both Black & Indigenous women and what would happen when you engage in a reparative framework of "returning resources" to Black & Indigenous women.

Both the funder and the participants took on risks as they engaged in this exploration of reparative models. For the funder, they had to work with lawyers, tax professionals, accountants in order to create the infrastructure to legally transfer a significant amount of money to individuals rather than the usual 501(c)3. For participants, they took on the potential risks of unintended harms of receiving a large sum of money as well as the social risk of rifts in relationships or backlash if others learned of their participation in the cohort. Backlash to Black & Indigenous liberation and wealth building has been a reality and constant threat throughout US history and it is something that has to be taken seriously.

Because the Liberated Leadership cohort was developed in a very organic process without any previously established systems or infrastructure, they truly needed to build this new space together - funders and cohort members. Participatory processes and co-creation, while absolutely worth it, can be messy and incredibly challenging. From the challenges, they learned that communication and shared understanding of dreams are crucial from the beginning. The expectations and intentions need to be discussed openly together between funders and participants at the starting point. It's important to slow down and take time with this stage.



Furthermore, the style of communication is very important as a group navigates the inevitable twists, turns and changes of an experimental pilot program. Cohort members as well as Threshold Philanthropy staff expressed a desire for deep relationship with each other. However, both felt that communication eventually became transactional - focusing more on logistics rather connection and trust.

There was a challenging moment when the cohort expressed to Threshold Philanthropy that one year is not enough time to repair harm, foster healing as liberated leaders or to learn from this new model in philanthropy. As one cohort member pointed out, "A one-year program—what would we have learned within a year? Even in our bodies, how to receive—what could we have really learned?" The shift from one year to three was a critical adjustment, and other funders could learn from Threshold Philanthropy's flexibility, recognizing the importance of giving time for true growth

and transformation to occur.

Even still, when Threshold Philanthropy staff intentionally received this request to extend the cohort and to distribute more funding, there was some tension. Threshold Philanthropy staff did not plan for three years and so they needed to make internal adjustments in order to satisfy that request. Staff was committed to making those changes on behalf of the cohort but there was also a breakdown in communication. They didn't want to preoccupy the cohort with all the internal work that needed to happen. This good-hearted intention left a gap in communication that created some worry and disappointment amongst the cohort.

Transparency, vulnerability and compassion are all areas to invest in. Funders and cohort members all are human beings with emotional needs, fears, anxieties, work styles, and communication preferences. Creating the space for everyone involved to communicate openly, not only as it relates to getting the work done or moving the cohort forward, but to communicate on a heart to heart level is so important.



# Relationships

*The relationships within the cohort brought a kind of wealth that money can't buy. We shared our stories, struggles, and triumphs, and that connection was invaluable.*

-Liberated Leadership Cohort Participant

The relationships within the cohort including the facilitator were a source of strength. "The hope is to figure out how to stay connected, maybe once a year," one member shared, highlighting the desire for continued connection beyond the formal structure of the cohort. "The way [the facilitator] held us," one cohort member remembered warmly, reflecting on the depth of care and connection that permeated their monthly gatherings. This wasn't just about the money; it was about the emotional intimacy, the connection, the care that they shared with each other.

Another cohort member shared that it was so helpful "hearing other people have the same emotional reaction" to receiving a large amount of money. They were able to lean on each other as they felt the discomfort of receiving and navigated the fears of potential backlash or unintended consequences. The cohort helped them not feel alone as they tried to figure out what to do with the money,

how to manage it and how to work with tax professionals. Most importantly, they were able to affirm and inspire each other in their journeys as liberated leaders. Witnessing each other's power, creativity and boldness nurtured their souls as they moved through the vulnerability of being seen and of receiving.

Receiving the money from Threshold Philanthropy also facilitated healing for the cohort members' familial and community relationships. The ability to handle unexpected expenses like a deductible for an insulin pump for a loved one, or to support others in the community was transformative. One cohort participant shared that the financial support allowed her to be more thoughtful in how she spent her money, focusing on supporting Black and Indigenous communities: "I was able to pay for my Indigenous friend's expired vehicle tabs fees and bail him out, supporting him against the systems of oppression," she shared, reflecting on the

empowerment that comes from using resources to lift others. Some cohort members used the money to help cover housing expenses for themselves so that they could provide shelter to family and friends. Others used money to cover housing expenses for family and help remodel homes of aging parents. Others used the funds to create financial security for their children and help cover education expenses. The ability to care for your community, and the freedom to dream with loved ones were among those nourishing aspects over the 3 years.

Lastly, the relationship between cohort participants and Threshold Philanthropy was another space that had the potential for healing. Cohort participants as well as Threshold Philanthropy team members yearned for deep connection and trust with each other.

Threshold Philanthropy was committed to the idea of letting the cohort lead their own process without a feeling of external pressure or expectations from Threshold Philanthropy as the funder. They were very aware of the harmful power dynamics that often develop between funders and participants. As they looked back on the Liberated Leadership cohort, Threshold Philanthropy staff recognized that perhaps they stepped too far back in an effort to give

the cohort independence.

They also didn't want to bother or preoccupy the cohort with the internal dynamics of their organization as the funder. This was another sincere intention that had the impact of feeling like lack of communication and connection on the part of the cohort. One cohort member shared: "Threshold Philanthropy threw money at us and then walked away. It was disappointing to the core of my soul," one member shared.

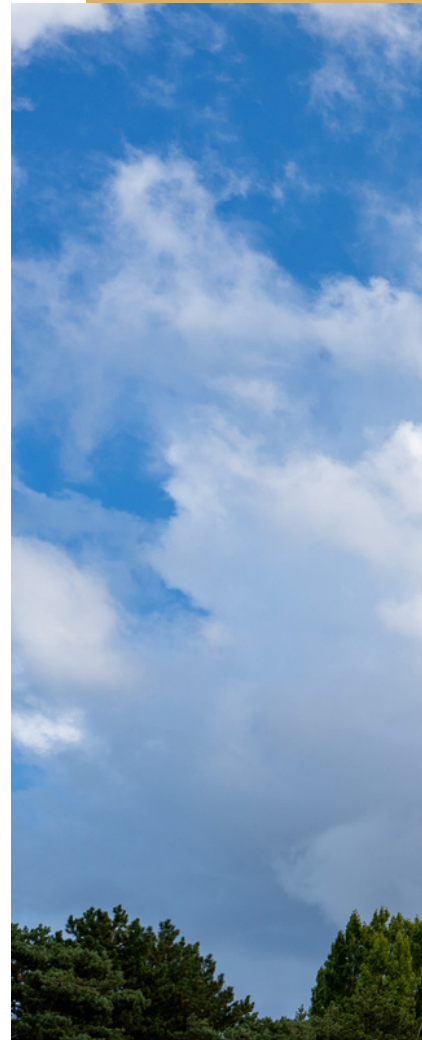
In moments of discomfort and tension, when there are so many unknowns in a new process, it can be easy to pull away from relationships instead of leaning more deeply into them. It can be easy to make assumptions or to create a narrative in one's mind about the needs or thoughts of another. The fear of stepping on someone's toes may prevent you from stepping toward that person all together. Relationships are sensitive, delicate energy fields. They are a dance - and when you are really releasing yourself, giving your all to dancing, sometimes you step on someone's toes. When asked if they could change anything about the cohort, Threshold Philanthropy staff members shared a desire to spend more time with the cohort, especially in person. They wished they had started the cohort with more in-person time of relationship and trust building and continued the relationship building throughout the process.

## Care & Safety

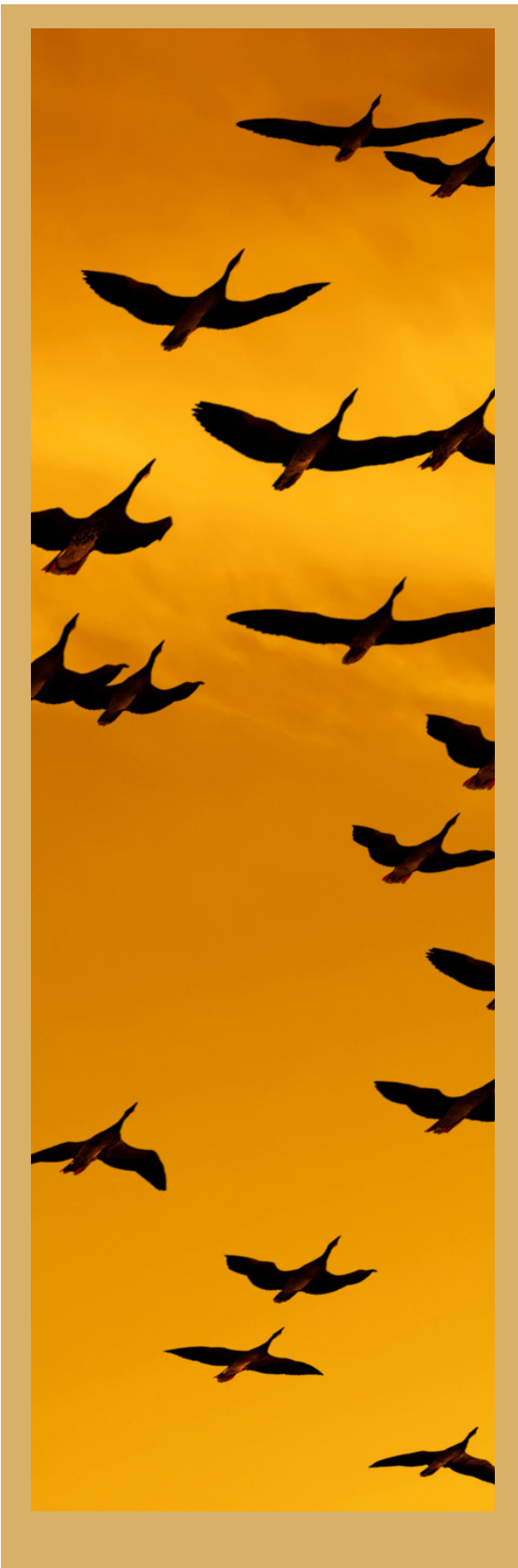
The threat of backlash and harm towards the perceived prosperity of Black and Indigenous women cannot be underestimated. Throughout American history, this threat has manifested in various forms, from microaggressions and funding withdrawals to changes in public policy and even physical violence. From this experience, we learned the critical importance of anonymity and protecting the privacy of recipients for their safety and well-being, both physically and emotionally.

There are genuine safety concerns, including the mental health challenges and the need for support in this type of work. Many of the leaders were not in a position to even inform their closest family members about the financial support they received, in order to avoid the stress of having to turn people away. This secrecy can take an emotional toll. On the other hand, sharing this information with family or community members often led to additional stress due to the heightened expectations that they could now provide more financial support. The guilt that accompanies financial freedom does not always feel liberating.

Lateral violence within professional circles is another concern that must be carefully managed. The cohort provided a vital space for shared experiences, such as dealing with the judgment







of community members when cohort members took much-needed vacations. External harm was also highlighted when news of funding recipients was shared outside of the Threshold Philanthropy. One leader, who sought additional funds for her community work, was told by a potential funder, “You have money you’ve been given from Threshold Philanthropy.” Protecting recipients from potential backlash and loss of future funding is essential when reimagining and creating redistributive wealth models like the Liberated Leadership Cohort.

What is the cost of this liberation? Safety and care must be built into this work from the very beginning.

There is also a serious question of: how can we sustainably care for the people who care for our community? One cohort member who works in birth justice for Indigenous women stated: “The work I do, who I am I will burn out. When the Liberated Leadership cohort was developed, it was around burnout—part of the reparation and money is tied to the notion of burnout in a racist system,” she said. The toll of doing social justice work, of constantly fighting against systems of oppression, weighed heavily on her. “If I only have 3-5 years left [before I am too exhausted to continue my work], what happens next? What are the resources for people like me who are burned out?” she questioned, expressing a deep concern for the future of those who pour their hearts into healing and justice work.

The Liberated Leadership cohort offers a taste of a future vision where grassroots community leaders are supported, nurtured and cared for as they in turn care for their community. The social impact sector (nonprofits, community organizing, government workers, educators, etc) are expected to make incredible personal sacrifices because of their love of the communities they serve. But who will hold them up after they’ve made all of these sacrifices? Who will care for them when they have nothing left to give? How can we redistribute wealth in such a way that creates rest, care, and freedom for Black & Indigenous women?

# Making Returns in the Midst of an Extractive Economy

Receiving a large sum of money can be both a gift and a burden, especially for Black and Indigenous women whose communities have faced consistent economic exploitation. This influx of funds often brings with it a sense of responsibility to support others within your community, as the economic harms that have persisted for generations have left many without sufficient resources. American capitalism has never stopped extracting wealth from Black & Indigenous communities not only in the forms of land, exploited labor, and racist government policies but also through predatory financial practices that all continue today. All of that does not go away after one funder makes a reparative financial return. The Black & Indigenous women in the cohort and their families will continue to be impacted by those systems until those systems are abolished or radically transformed.

Moreover, the US government's response to an increase in income often leads to the reduction or loss of essential support services. This punitive approach to rising income levels fails to account for the unique harms Black and Indigenous communities face as they work to build wealth. These communities have historically been attacked and preyed upon as every effort of attempting to accumulate assets, meaning that even with increased income, they may still lack the foundational wealth needed for true economic security. Thus, while the financial support provided by Threshold Philanthropy offers a significant opportunity, it also highlights the systemic barriers that continue to hinder wealth accumulation and economic independence for Black & Indigenous communities.

We state this not to discourage or devalue future reparative efforts to return resources to Black & Indigenous communities. Threshold Philanthropy started to reflect on other ways the money could have been distributed that would be subversive and cause fewer unintended consequences for recipients. Were there are opportunities to pay directly for something rather than transferring the money, causing less of a legal and tax burden? This is an area for continued imagination, creativity and reflection.





## Freedom to Dream

Liberated Leadership cohort members used the money they received to build even more freedom into their lives. One woman emphasized how “money created freedom.” For her, having a savings account and not worrying about paying for essential medical needs, like an insulin pump, was a significant relief. It wasn’t just about financial security; it was about having one less thing to worry about in life and thus more spaciousness to dream.

The cohort members recognized the complex relationship between freedom and resources. “I’m thirsty for more freedom,” one member said. “What would it be like if I didn’t have to worry about money? To have more space to do what I love without worrying if it will pay me?” This question reflects a deep desire to move beyond the constraints of financial insecurity, to imagine a life where creativity and passion aren’t limited by the need to survive American capitalism.

Another cohort member found nourishment in the space to dream. “The ability to dream was here because we had the money. Yes, we have space to dream where the future feels more free and open, where options are available and are real options,” she said. The power of imagination, of dreaming big, was something the cohort found hard to quantify but deeply valuable.

As she reflected back on the cohort, the facilitator asked: “How do we decolonize dreams and imaginations? Do only white folks get to dream and imagine? How do we create space to dream and imagine?” Another cohort member added: “It’s opened up dreaming...helped me realize that the resources help to lean into the dream,” she said, acknowledging the role that financial support played in allowing her to envision a different future.



## 05. Stories of Liberated Leaders

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We tell and honor these women not just as data points, but as deep wells of wisdom, each with lives and experiences that connect us all. These stories reflect the richness of their many roles and the importance of their journeys. At Headwater People Consulting, we have woven together the threads of individual pasts, presents, and futures to show how the cohort has impacted their lives. They shared deeply with us, and the love they gave us, we reciprocate to honor their journeys by sharing these stories. We hope these stories guide the work, inspire, and shape how reparative efforts can affect individual lives and communities. Held within these pages are tears, laughter, reflection, and inspiration, as we consider how this reparative work can move forward in a good way for future cohorts, individuals, and communities.

# Nurturer of Sacred Beginnings

She grew up in the forest, plumbing and RV a luxury  
the forest, rich with ancestral wisdoms and life,  
became her understanding of wealth  
wealth wasn't about money;  
wealth was being connected to the spaces of her ancestors  
Money exists in this world,  
but true wealth is found in the art of her mother, in giving

She knows how to give—giving until maybe she can't anymore  
She thinks sometimes burnout is inevitable  
Does the Forest feel these concerns?  
This worry lingers, as she supports her family, her parents, and her community  
She works tirelessly for them, ready to lay down her life to ensure they thrive

As a community worker, a mother, a granddaughter, a grandmother,  
she finds her strength in the teachings of the forests  
Memories of running with her brother through the trees,  
each breath filled with teachings and stories  
Forest teachings and upbringing taught her the essence of wealth—  
where money may buy a house, but the land the forest, that's true wealth  
The teachings of the trees and the forest ground her,  
guiding her as a community member,  
where sacrifice, giving, supporting are natural parts of sustaining the ecosystem

The money from the cohort didn't erase the trauma around money  
and systemic racism,  
but it did provide space to reflect, to find relief, to dream  
It created new systems of wealth—  
wealth in relationships within the cohort,  
healing through therapy,  
and connecting with elders who teach her how to feel in deep spaces within her body

Yet, questions remain  
How does this change the future? It's still unknown  
The money didn't resolve the fear of what happens if she can no longer work—  
what will happen to the organization and the people she cares for?  
She wonders, does the forest fear,  
or does it rely on the roots that connect?  
She thinks of these roots  
These are the questions foundations must ask—what does this work do for the future?  
What does this work do to heal roots?



In her world there has always needed to be a  
plan B  
always considering the “what ifs”  
She dreams of a future where the lives of her community don’t need constant advocacy  
and always thinking about a  
plan B,  
but if there are still people like her doing this work,  
she hopes they can take a break  
sell flowers on the side of the road  
to plant, to dwell in the forest  
surrounded by the laughter of new and old

her work— a journey of over 12 years caring for the community  
without being paid in the traditional sense  
For the first time, she is being paid for it  
The money allowed her to take a pay cut and continue this work  
She is a planter and a grower, drawn into this work by the stories of their children  
by data that revealed the truth  
She gathered the community to advocate for families,  
and she will continue to be part of the story

You will find her selling flowers, growing medicines, caring for her children,  
their children, your children,  
working to hold and advocate for the wealth of her community,  
just as the forest taught her when she ran through its teaching with her brother  
She is a holder of her grandson, who connects her to her brother

# Nourisher of Cultural Power

I am deserving, she says  
I am doing the work I always knew I would

She speaks these truths as she breaks cycles,  
finds light, and holds on to that light,  
to spread and speak that light  
She knows she is deserving of it  
Of that light

Generations before her,  
grandparents whose ability to give was broken by systems of oppression,  
homes stolen away for freeways,  
but she knows she is deserving  
Parents who made a way,  
a lineage of family who would lay down their lives,  
pay for lawyers, go to deep lengths,  
a father who cared for a grandmother, knowing that relationships are wealth—  
wealth in caring for each other  
She cares for him  
A mother who made her feel loved and seen,  
who allowed her to be whole,  
who made her feel and know she is deserving  
She cares for her

What is wealth?  
I am rich in culture because of them  
I am rich in belonging because of them  
She finds joy and sparks joy  
She looks at things deeply,  
curious and questioning,  
connecting to community and responsibility,  
and dreaming big, working tirelessly for those dreams

She sparks joy, she sparks hope,  
she loves on her people,  
finding the right ways of being in our commonalities

She speaks—  
a body unafraid to challenge,  
to say, “I will be on the right side of history,”  
she is more than an ally;  
she is in it for Black and Indigenous, queer and non-binary.  
She breaks the chains,  
creating spaces for art, for people to be fully deserving

She speaks truths and breathes joy  
“We Black and Brown communities  
are often defined by what’s lacking,”  
not by the wealth, the richness,  
the beauty, and the joy that exist despite it all  
We are fuller when we learn from one another,  
we dream big, we are confident,  
“We work our asses off” we make it happen  
If you’re not with us, you’re on the wrong side of history  
If you’re not with us, it’s your loss

She is a nourisher  
“we have to feed people’s bellies,  
but we also have to feed their hearts and souls.”  
Her work  
Art and culture became the way to do that,  
a connection to community that could go beyond

Money isn’t the same as the wealth of her work,  
the wealth of her culture,  
but she knows it’s not one or the other  
But the money this money has helped -  
she who knows her worth - she has also asked why me and not you?

But she built and breathed thoughtfully  
able to take a breath  
This capitalistic society where money allowed her to breathe  
Quietly  
She’s created sustainability for the future of her family  
It’s been transformational,  
time with her father, making him a home



Relief for her mother, investing in her home  
Breaking cycles of theft from home  
She is deserving of being paid what she's worth,  
but non-profit ED are never paid what they are worth  
this co-hort, this stability,  
has given her the power to choose,  
to spend wisely,  
to support her community,  
to buy Black artists' work  
She is a watcher, a connector,  
a builder, a reclaimer of space,  
taking up space until we are all seen  
She speaks in what seem interchangeable words "we," "she," and "us."  
She speaks of all of us being deserving of taking up space  
We can build the new ways  
Wealth—  
culturally rich, socially rich  
Her mom didn't have a lot of money,  
but she made sure she had everything she needed,  
made her feel culturally rich  
Her mom didn't have a lot of money,  
but she gave everything,  
trying hard to break cycles,  
to ensure she had what she needed, both materially and emotionally  
That richness runs deep in her,  
as she builds spaces and places  
for us all to know and feel deserving of it all.

# Quiet Protector of Home & Story

In the spring's embrace, she began a ritual  
Tender fingers sowing seeds—her nation's gift  
Each year, an offering from distant and yet close lands  
Ancestral strains, reborn in new soil  
Her ancestors, she feels, watch in amusement  
She is their student  
Learning from their food and caretaking traditions  
They share laughter together  
As she wrestles with corn's husks  
And ants cling stubbornly to seeds of promise

She is an artist no matter what she is creating  
Yet she felt adrift in art school  
missing something essential beyond canvas and oil paint  
Returning home she realized it was community she was missing

She started her career into arts administration  
But the old structures weighed heavily—  
Sending rejection letters  
the pain of bureaucratic gatekeeping  
Her spirit cried out to move beyond these colonial practices

Liberate the space  
Open the doors  
She started imagining a space where Native artists could showcase their stories,  
Anyone who wanted to participate  
Hundreds of artists and hundreds of pieces of art  
A canvas for the collective  
It was clear that there was a hunger for this space

She confronted incredible challenges  
12 hour work days  
Push back from other artists  
Building community, creating art  
Amidst deep generational trauma  
Sometimes she felt exhausted and like she wanted to give up  
But her community kept calling her in  
Leaning on her for collaboration and partnership

The seeds of her dreams continue to grow  
A nonprofit takes root in a land newly bought

An art center to nurture and celebrate  
An open space for the neighborhood's heartbeat  
A home for Native artists

Art is not merely a finished piece  
It is process, collective creation  
A sanctuary of togetherness, not just exhibition  
The medicine is in the process, not only the final product

Her leadership is quiet and introspective  
Deeply reflective and builds infrastructure  
When do we get to discuss the mental emotional journey of leaders?  
Her work is not only to create physical space for art  
But emotional space for artists  
For community  
To release trauma, pain, anger, fear  
When they can't share their story with a white institutional leader  
They can share it with her - a Native sister

Her middle-class upbringing made her wonder if she should receive these funds  
Inner turmoil: Are there others who need this more?  
She came to realize there was something special about distributing funds in a somewhat random manner

Her approach to wealth, cautious yet creative  
She wondered if she should pursue some bold dream with the money received  
She chose an integration into daily life, not a dramatic shift  
A safety net  
The ability to welcome her future children with stability and security

She cherishes the simple joys of a new home  
A view of the surrounding nature, the beauty of daily life  
the pleasure of beautiful objects  
All essential to the artist's soul, to the human heart  
Being able to afford these simple things is true wealth  
It is true wellbeing

Liberation, she sees, is not about jumping through hoops  
Applications and proving yourself  
Proving your need  
Or proving your worth  
Liberation brings freedom from competition and scarcity  
A healing process: witnessing the unburdened grace of support  
Our humanity makes us worthy

She wants other women of color to know they too are worthy of care and support  
She desires beauty for her sisters  
She works towards freedom for her sisters



# Planter of Songs

She is a planter and a holder of songs,  
carrying within her both the ancient chants  
and the new ones that connect and reconnect healing

Her journey began not in the lands of her ancestors  
but in the heart of the city,  
but the land heard her call

Curiosity and remembering,  
books and conversations within community different yet the same,  
she learned to plant, to grow, to nurture—  
skills that were once second nature to her ancestors  
but had to be reclaimed in a new landscape

Birthing her children and the community's children guided her back to the land,  
showing her where to plant, what to nurture  
Her hands open now cradled seeds and medicines  
But the land and planting she tends is not just physical;  
it is in the soil, the deep connections, and the stories  
passed down through generations who held onto these seeds  
and stories as acts of love for the ones to come

She is a planter and a connection of songs  
Coming from a lineage marked by stolen children,  
where her grandmother was taken by government-sanctioned schools,  
she feels the deep loss of connection to the land  
and places of her ancestors  
while holding onto tools of resistance

Her grandmother gave until there was nothing left,  
a pattern shaped by generations of survival and resilience  
But how do we give and still be cared for, she wonders  
The financial support from the cohort provided her with a chance to dream,  
to envision what it could mean to be caretakers unburdened by trauma,  
unburdened by the tools of survival forced upon her and the ones who came before  
She, like the leaders and ancestors, before her carries the deep desire to give forward  
and to help others dream  
as she's been given this opportunity to live her dream  
She continues to sing, and she continues to plant

She experienced internal tension  
between wanting to use this money for her family's security  
and the urge to give money to her wider family and community  
She sings more songs and knows that they are not disconnected from each other  
the fear of being poor again  
the guilt of why me  
There were also fears of losing essential resources  
like government-subsidized health insurance  
when receiving this amount of money

She knows she wouldn't have made it without the support  
not just the money,  
but the relationships, friendships, and connections within the cohort  
She continues to sing, and she continues to plant

She is a planter and a rebirther of songs  
Liberation from worry of money has enabled her to hold  
and care for land for future generations,  
to dream of growth, healing, and stability for her community

Her work started with babies, families, and the community—  
it continues with growing, both plants and people  
Wealth, in her eyes, is being able to grow foods,  
to harvest medicines in a good way, in prayer and song.  
Wealth is the richness of knowing her neighbors and a strong community  
She continues to sing, and she continues to plant.

# o6. Facilitating the Cohort

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## Facilitating A House Full of Love & Strength

She walks into every room carrying the stories and wisdom of generations  
grandmothers and mothers who are now ancestors  
passed down stories of survival, strength, and resilience  
These rooms, where she now stands, are filled with people who may not know her history  
that of her mother, of what it means to come from her story  
her story of growing like ivy, Black ivy  
when she was never meant to grow  
but she continues to move toward the light  
She moves into rooms that have never met the likes of her  
her strength, her laughter, her truth-telling  
all guided by those good and hard stories from her mother and their mothers  
Her journey is connected like roots and vines  
weaving these wisdoms, stories, and strengths into each of her steps and words

She had been known to cuss out those who don't understand the struggle or the injustice  
when she connects rooms with her story and laughter  
she does it with the power of generations behind her  
She is a promise of survival  
a living testament to the resilience of her mother, grandmothers, ancestors  
She leads  
Her promise isn't just for herself; it's for her children whom she teaches  
that it's never too late to go to college, buy a house no one thought they could own  
or walk away from a high-powered job to start something new  
She's a mother, not just to her children, but to her community  
creating spaces for them to belong, to heal, and to dream  
Curling and spiraling like ivy, making beautiful things

She is a seer, a listener, an advocate  
Vines and branches move and bring together  
Originally hired to facilitate the cohort for one year,  
As she listened to the cohort she heard from them  
that a single year wouldn't be enough to truly reflect, learn, and grow  
Those who have had so much taken away  
have to learn how to receive

How do we decolonize dreams and imaginations?



Do only white folks get to dream and imagine?  
How do we create space to dream and imagine?  
These questions weren't just questions; they were calls to her spirit  
Like ivy moving and connecting, she advocated for the women in the cohort  
She listened to them

She is a cultivator of connections  
creating spaces where Black and Indigenous women can rest, dream, and grow  
becoming rich in both relationships and, yes, in resources  
She wants these women to have enough to sustain themselves  
to live a life of lasting liberation  
The relationship she nurtured within the cohort  
went beyond the boundaries of one, two, three years  
These relationships are strong  
they continue to grow like ivy  
It was about fostering connections between the women  
connecting stories to stories  
and ensuring that each woman had the space to be seen and heard  
This work requires love and advocacy

In a house with rooms named for grandmothers  
she sustains herself with the strength of generations  
with the love and care she pours into her work  
Like ivy, she holds strong  
rooted in her story, yet free to move, to bend, and to adapt to whatever comes her way  
She is resilient enough to ask the hard questions  
to challenge, to say What the Hell—  
unafraid to cry, to laugh, to care, to stand up, and to guide  
She creates space for others to rest  
To be whole  
To be nurtured  
She plants seeds for others like her  
So that our community can grow and flourish

# 07. Threshold Philanthropy

## Staff Stories

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### Leading with Liberatory Dreams (co-CEO)

Working on the frontlines of change as a teacher  
Witnessing the institutionalized racism of the public school system  
Like so many Black women, she does not just watch  
She chooses to fight  
To fight for children, Black children, so that they are supported, nurtured, believed in  
Education was her everything  
Moving from teaching to coaching teachers to  
becoming the executive director of an education nonprofit  
She kept fighting with a heart full of love and fire

That was her first experience with philanthropy and it was miserable  
Funders were not listening to her  
Without teaching or education experience of their own  
They would tell her why her thinking about education was wrong  
Or that she needed to prove herself as an executive director and leader  
She entered the philanthropy sector to be a disruptor

She moved to work at a family foundation focused on education  
She built their racial equity in education portfolio from the ground up  
With constant pushback, constant isolation and the lack of support  
She was exhausted  
She did not feel like she had the space for healing when she entered Threshold Philanthropy  
So she was reactionary in some of her approaches at Threshold Philanthropy even as she had the new  
space to dream and vision

Starting the cohort by offering questions to a group of liberated leaders:  
Who are you? What are your dreams? What is your calling?  
What would you do if you could be supported fully, just as a person?  
They started to hear the dreams of the liberated leaders  
For so many, their dreams were connected to ancestors, community, identity

When she started her career in teaching her parents were not happy with her  
They wanted her to be a doctor, lawyer  
She internalized the idea that she needed to be “excellent” as a Black woman  
She internalized the idea that her work was her worth  
And that she was not inherently worthy as a human being.  
The Liberated Leadership cohort pushed her to ask herself:

Who am I beyond my labor?

What is my spirit calling for? Not just what brings a paycheck or brings me status

After being invited to participate in the Liberated Leadership cohort and to receive the return of a large sum of money, participants started to ask:

How did I get picked? Why me? Do I deserve this?

What do you want the cohort to do? To produce?

It was a reflection and mirror to how she was feeling as staff at Threshold Philanthropy

Why me? Why am I being given this chance to lead and to fund,

To be listened to,

when so many other Black women and Native women are not given this opportunity?

As a Black woman working in philanthropy, she had to grapple with this

Committed to following the lead of the Liberated Leadership cohort

And inviting the cohort to truly shape the process and name what they needed

But this was an imperfect and messy process

At times, she felt like she let people down

At times, she felt frustrated she couldn't move money more quickly

Or force lawyers and accountants to sign off on documents at a faster pace

So many times when she felt like she wasn't doing enough, not doing her job well enough

Moments when she wanted to reach to her sisters in liberated leadership

And ask if someone could have her back

To see her not as a funder, or institution, but as a human being trying her best in a system she didn't create

Who are you? What are your dreams? What is your calling?

What would you do if you could be supported fully, just as a person?

Giving thanks to the cohort for inspiring her,

Reminding her,

Through their examples, through their process

That she is more than her job

More than her role in philanthropy

She is a dreamer, a fighter, a lover

# Boldly Creating New Possibilities (co-CEO)

Oluwatoyin Salau

In the midst of George Floyd uprisings

And threatened by the Covid-19 pandemic

19 year old activist, Oluwatoyin, went to the streets and used the power of her voice

To proclaim that Black lives matter and Black trans lives matter

She did this as she herself struggled with housing instability

And then she was murdered by a man who offered her a place to stay

“What are we doing if frontline activists don’t have a place to sleep?”

She asked in her new role leading Threshold Philanthropy

This gave birth to a fire

Ready to push philanthropy to invest directly in individuals

While working at a local foundation focused on giving to women-centered nonprofits,

she received an invitation from a dear friend and coworker to start a new foundation

Something on their own terms

Something that would allow them to experiment, try new things and to heal

Something that allowed them to bring their dreams

Where does the new foundation begin their work:

listening to women of color leaders

These leaders worked in nonprofits, philanthropy, academia and the arts

Interview after interview affirmed the need to invest in women of color leaders

Organically, naturally

They brought together a cohort made up of many of the women we interviewed

Black and Indigenous women in their home state

They started with a one year pilot and built as they journeyed

There was no endowment and no administrative infrastructure

But they had passion and determination

Trying something new

Building something new

Brings challenges and moments of discomfort

Tension

They were aware of the power dynamics between funders and grantee partners

Therefore they didn’t want to impose themselves on the liberated leadership cohort

They wanted to give them the space and power

to invite Threshold Philanthropy staff in to participate with them on their own terms

But she believes this could have been experienced by the cohort as absence on their part

Or even disinterest in building a relationship



When the cohort came to Threshold Philanthropy staff  
Naming that 1 year was simply not enough time to address the traumas they have experienced as women of color leaders  
And that they needed more time, 2 more years to go deeper in their healing journey  
Immediately that felt right and she set out to work on it  
But she needed time to keep building and making good on that request  
Threshold Philanthropy didn't have an endowment and a pot of money sitting there to be used  
Moving the money for the first year of the pilot felt almost unbelievable  
that they were able to do that  
And so she needed to navigate this new challenge  
When she received an email with some pushback from the cohort  
Wanting to know what they could expect for the continuation of the process  
And if Threshold Philanthropy was going to disperse additional funds to each participant  
She admits she was hurt  
She was saddened  
She felt like she and her co-CEO were being seen as "producers" only  
and not as sisters, partners in this process  
And in this fight for liberation  
Communication was challenging  
And it was hard to set clear expectations as they were still building this new thing

"I like the idea that we didn't know exactly what we were doing and we still tried"  
Threshold Philanthropy didn't have a precedent or existing infrastructure for granting money to individuals  
They knew the intersection of Black and Indigenous was a little murky  
And they still tried  
If she would have done anything differently  
She would have hired both a Black woman and Indigenous woman as co-facilitators  
She would have been more sensitive to the unique backgrounds of the cohort participants  
There are so many different experiences with the Black experience and within the Indigenous experience in the US  
She would have started the cohort with an in-person gathering so everyone could meet and be in community together  
Really building trust and building deep relationships with each other

As the cohort comes to a close  
she's left with the questions  
How do we prepare ourselves to receive reparations and to receive the return of resources?  
What are the practical considerations?  
And what healing work is required?

# Opening to Radical Generosity (Founding Funder)

This story is deeply personal  
Threshold Philanthropy wasn't an effort to show white people how to be good philanthropists  
This was a time to try something out  
To test, to experiment  
Leaning into discomfort  
And challenging how things are done

Could philanthropy be a space for reparations?  
If not reparations, at least for repair?  
For healing and reconciliation?  
For the return of resources?  
For relationship and reconnection?

Growing up near Lumberton, North Carolina  
Being influenced by both Native American and Black communities  
Creating a space that would return resources to both Native American and Black women  
Felt necessary and true

This was not her first experiment in reparations and return  
Through the Sisterhood Collective  
She shared stories and experiences with a group of white and Black women  
And the white women made financial returns to their Black sisters  
Through ceremony and ritual, they recognized the trauma and harm surrounding money  
What are our money stories?  
What money stories did we inherit from our families?  
Of course, one ceremony does not cleanse you of money trauma  
Through the Sisterhood, she recognized that any financial return  
would require support for healing  
And a community, a circle to heal with

As the Executive Director of a foundation that had only given  
to white women-led nonprofits in its 20 year history  
She was hired as a "constructive destructor"  
she was there to support them through transition and to help them grow  
The foundation was forward-thinking in some ways  
They were early supporters of providing general operating dollars

Trusting that organizations knew what to do best with their money  
But the foundation also fell into some of the same traps that many do in philanthropy  
Repeatedly, organizations led by women of color would make it a certain level in the grantmaking process  
but would never be selected  
Did the white women leading the foundation simply not trust leaders of color?

Becoming a funder who could ask hard questions of themselves and their institution  
A funder who would take risks and challenge systems  
Didn't happen after reading a book alone in a room  
Or sitting with a group of white women talking about race  
It happened by being engaged in multiracial community  
Sitting with women of different cultures and backgrounds  
She had plenty of opportunities to mess up publicly  
Say and do the wrong thing  
And be called back into community to do better  
She learned early that we're all going to make mistakes  
And that's part of the learning too

For this work to truly be healing, it has to be relational  
Repair includes repairing relationships, our ability to truly connect  
She was committed to following Black women leadership in the new organization she was co-creating  
But fears she ended up distancing myself from the cohort.  
She put up an unintended "protective" layer  
separating her from the Liberated Leadership cohort  
And therefore, her role as a funder began to feel transactional rather than relational  
If she could do anything differently,  
She'd share more physical and emotional space with the cohort  
She'd start the cohort by spending time together in person  
She'd still create the space for the cohort to have the time they need alone and in affinity spaces  
She'd still follow their lead when they invited her to participate  
But she'd communicate clearly and actively  
That she was present in the process  
And was willing to do the work of relationship-building  
Be present

## o8. Returning to the Future: Paths towards Reparative Futures

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This report celebrates not only the financial returns provided to the cohort but also the immeasurable wealth of relationships, creativity, and leadership that were nurtured through this process. It invites us to embrace the messy, beautiful, and sometimes painful work of liberation, with the understanding that transformation takes time—more than a year, perhaps more than a lifetime. Reparative efforts are not linear; they do not follow a neat path from harm to healing.

The brave work of the cohort, their willingness to dream, risk, and co-create, shows us that the future we long for requires love, care and a deep commitment to relationship. For so many in Indigenous and Black communities, relationships are life. Relationships have held our communities together in the most beautiful and horrific times. Relationships are our spiritual nourishment, our source of physical wellbeing, our protection in a world of oppression and exploitation. We must remember that “relationship” is not a word held lightly in reparative work.

American white supremacist patriarchal capitalism works to isolate and heavily emphasizes individualism; it actively hinders our ability to build meaningful, loving, caring relationships with each other - and especially across our differences. So healing relationships is at the heart of repairing the harm caused by this system. Investing in relationships is also critical for dismantling and transforming this system. It is clear from the stories in this report, that investing in relationships requires work, effort, and vulnerability.

We close with the poem, *How Big Is Your Brave*, which echoes the spirit of the Liberated Leadership Cohort. As we carry these stories into the future, let us be brave enough to speak truth, to dream, to heal, and to keep moving forward together.



# How Big Is Your Brave?

How big is your brave?  
Carried and rooted by generations past  
brave enough to receive,  
big enough to heal

How big is your brave?  
Is the past too painful to see  
that this wealth is built on oppression?  
brave enough to give,  
big enough to heal

How big is our brave?  
Big enough to recognize  
that healing is not bound by time—  
it heals the past, it heals the now,  
it heals the future.  
Our brave big enough to dream,  
to learn from our mistakes and keep moving forward together

Are we ready?  
Have our hearts been prepared to handle the disappointments,  
the inevitable pain this work carries?  
Are our hearts open to receive?  
Can we trust?

Our brave is big enough.  
Our kindness is enough.  
Our forgiveness is enough—  
when held in relationship,  
relationships that won't walk away,  
relationships that hold and connect across time,  
interweaving a basket of knowledge,  
carrying the grief and pain, the joy and laughter.  
You are, I am, brave enough to walk—  
run—into that healing.  
Cause our brave is rooted in love

Our birthright is to  
create, grow, flourish, and  
cultivate paths of healing,  
joy, love, and restoration  
for us and future  
generations. May it be so!

Bernier McCaw  
Foundation

# With Aloha

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