



CENTERING BLACKNESS: THE PATH TO ECONOMIC LIBERATION FOR ALL

By: Anne Price, Jhumpa Bhattacharya, and Dorian Warren

INTRODUCTION

Before the COVID-19 crisis, there was growing recognition that structural racism perpetuates unequal and adverse life outcomes for Black people. The *New York Times Magazine's* **1619 project** shed light on how Black people and their needs have been historically exploited, neglected, and undervalued in the creation of our nation's culture, economy, and democracy.¹ The disproportionate effects of the COVID crisis, along with the ongoing **uprising** to end police brutality, is now illuminating this fact even brighter.² Yet outside of the visionary leaders and organizations shaping the current movement for Black lives there is still a great deal of reluctance, even among the progressive-minded, to consider the Black experience as unique and foundational to shaping America's economic and social policies—and our nation's collective future.

It is time to embark on a serious and sustained effort to center Blackness and the Black experience as a necessary strategy to ensure economic liberation for all Americans.

In these times of extreme racial and economic inequality, we must move beyond “normal” in our COVID recovery efforts and follow the lead of the Movement for Black Lives.³ **By centering Black people in the creation of new policies, systems, and institutions—in the pursuit of economic liberation for all—we can and must reject the ideology grounded in white supremacy and anti-blackness, shift narratives to reinvigorate our shared imagination, and disrupt the imbalance of power in our society.**

We as a society are eager for a reboot, a different way of living in connection with one another, and are ready to vision forward. It is time to champion new thinking that is shaped by what we all deeply and collectively value in life—self-determination, dignity, and freedom of choice—to create a society where everyone can truly thrive and experience shared abundance.

This essay is intended to provide the reasoning, vision and framework for our collective well-being that addresses the intentional disinvestment, dehumanization, and exclusion of Black people from economic prosperity by centering the Black experience. While not exhaustive in its scope, it is our hope that this initial essay can spark dialogue and encourage community members, advocates, organizers, researchers, writers, and artists to think and act together toward an aspirational goal of centering Blackness as a means for economic liberation for all.

Black People Are Not a Monolith, and Black Communities Are Not Monolithic

Black people are not a monolith. When we center Blackness, we acknowledge that Black people hold multiple identities. They are immigrants, women, LGBTQ, Latinx, parents, business owners, have varying degrees of education, disabilities, and more. When we make Blackness about one thing, we actually play into a white supremacist point of view that narrowly defines Blackness. Centering Blackness means honoring all types of Black people, which makes it an inclusionary strategy that acknowledges how anti-blackness is the tie that binds all Black people, while also validating all the other identities that make up a whole person. Centering Blackness is ultimately about celebrating and honoring the humanity of Black people.

WHAT DOES CENTERING BLACKNESS MEAN?

The real-life needs of Black people have been historically overlooked and undervalued in the creation of economic policies. **Anti-blackness, the devaluing and dehumanizing of people who are Black, is deeply rooted in American culture and economic policies.** Centering Blackness is a lens in which we can see the interactive effects of discrimination, subjugation, and disempowerment on the lives of Black people and how they are baked into our policies, practices, and institutions.

Centering Blackness takes into account the ways in which our social and economic structures are built on the invisibility and disposability, and yet necessity, of all Black people and Black labor. **Simply put, centering Blackness demands that we include Black people in the creation and design of policies and practices that intentionally lift and protect Black people.** It requires that Black people lead the creation of these policies and practices. It recognizes the uniqueness of economic disadvantage that has come to define the majority of the Black experience, and it puts Black people – specifically Black women - at the core of a vision for racial justice.

This kind of stated intentionality often leads to a false notion that speaking affirmatively about the Black lived experience means that you don't care about the well-being of other communities. The reality is quite the opposite: **Anti-blackness doesn't only impact Black people; it holds back and harms all Americans and necessitates collective healing.**⁴ We must consider that anti-blackness ensnares and disadvantages every potential beneficiary of economic-related policies and programs.

The expansion of Medicaid through the Affordable Care Act (ACA) is an example of how non-Black people experience the collateral effects of anti-black racism. Medicaid expansion guaranteed access to health care coverage under the law no matter where people live. However, southern states fought against the legislation, eventually making it so states would not be forced to expand Medicaid. According to the National Women's Health Network, the push back originated from the same racist and discriminatory arguments that were made in 1935 at the onset of Social Security, when southern legislators opposed a universal safety net because the federal assistance provided to Black workers would "upend the racial hierarchy that kept most Southern Black people economically dependent on [w]hite people."⁵ The Kaiser Family Foundation [reports](#) that while 11 percent of Black people remain uninsured, 7 percent of white people are also without coverage.⁶ In Mississippi, a state where Medicaid was not expanded, white women lack coverage at a higher rate than Black women. To paraphrase a recent book title, white opposition to universal social policies, rooted in anti-blackness, literally equals "dying of whiteness" for millions of poor and working-class white people.

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AN OVERVIEW OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

The pattern of violence against Black people is unique and foundational to understanding the Black experience in America. When it comes to measures of economic security, indicators related to health, or the criminal legal system, we see that the rules and narratives across sectors and systems were set up to penalize, fail, and devalue Black life.

Anti-blackness explains why Black people often fare worse across many economic indicators than white Americans, regardless of class. Today, white households own 10 times the wealth of Black households. Anti-black racism contributes to the persistence of racial inequality that manifests across many different economic indicators. For instance, the family income gap between Black people and white people today is nearly identical to that of the 1960s. Just after the Civil Rights Act passed in 1968, Black families had a median family income that was 57 percent of white families.⁷ Nearly 50 years later, and despite hard-fought gains in anti-discrimination legislation and increased access to housing and education, the income gap between white people and Black people stands at 56 percent. In 2017, Black people with a bachelor's degree were jobless at about the same rate as white people with only a high school diploma.⁸

We also live in a patriarchal society making it so Black women in particular have some of the lowest wealth levels of any group. Research shows that Black women have far less wealth than white women regardless of their level of education.⁹ **Single white women without a college degree have \$3,000 more in median wealth than single Black women with a college degree.**¹⁰ Typical, single white women with a bachelor's degree have seven times the wealth of their Black counterparts, \$35,000 and \$5,000 in median wealth, respectively.¹¹

Black women also experience the highest infant mortality rates (IMR) among any racial or ethnic group in the United States, and the Black IMR has been roughly twice that of the white IMR for over 35 years. In a tragic twist of fate, **the IMR actually rises for Black mothers with a doctorate degree.**¹²

Over-policing in communities of color leads to higher, disproportionate arrest rates for Black, Latinx, and Native American communities, and pervasive racism within our criminal legal system results in higher incarceration rates for Black and Brown people.¹³ As a result, Black communities have been, and continue to be, the most negatively impacted by the push for mass incarceration in the US.¹⁴ As noted in a recent Pew Research brief, "In 2016, Black [American]s represented 12 percent of the US adult population but 33 percent of the sentenced prison population. White [American]s accounted for 64 percent of adults but 30 percent of prisoners."¹⁵ A recent study showed that the leading cause of death for young Black men in America was getting shot by the police.¹⁶

Black people deserve more than what we as a society have allowed them to receive. By making a commitment to centering Blackness, we can ensure that all people are able to thrive and not just get by.

CENTERING BLACKNESS: A NEW STARTING POINT

Our work toward greater economic liberation is predicated on abandoning our contributions to centering whiteness and the white experience. When we start from a “dismantling white supremacy” frame, we are actually perpetuating the cycle of centering the white experience. This holds us in a box and puts us in a reactive state of consciousness confined by the story white supremacy tells. Essayist and editor Sherronda J. Brown describes white supremacy in this way: “White supremacy deals exclusively in lies. It does so because the violence it perpetuates can be justified when white supremacy controls the narrative of pain.” It’s critical that in our quest toward racial justice, we start from a place of truth, not lies.¹⁷ Having the starting point be white supremacy does not allow for that.

The antithesis of white supremacy is acknowledging the humanity of Black people who are villainized and regarded as sub-human. If we start from centering the Black experience, it steers our bodies, minds, and imaginations in a whole different direction, which can lead us toward true liberation.



Centering Blackness allows us to acknowledge Black genius, art, and joy—things that white supremacy actively works to erase, profit from, or destroy. Black people have always had to both demonstrate and negotiate their humanity in the face of oppression and seek ways to express their joy. Finding joy in the face of trauma and oppression is not only a form of resistance, but it’s also instrumental in dismantling anti-blackness and constructing an alternative world of Black freedom and thriving.

Additionally, centering Blackness allows us to interrogate harmful narratives about Black people and serve as a vehicle to heal from historical and present-day harms and trauma.¹⁸ Insofar as ideas and narratives are a core dimension of how power operates in our society, powerful narrative shifts can serve as a critical component of economic liberation. Alleged dysfunctional behaviors by Black people have long been falsely seen as the basic cause of persistent racial inequality, and these misconceptions serve as the basis of our economic and social policies. Social safety net programs, for example, are predicated on dehumanizing language and negative narratives about Black people as “lazy,” “cheats,” and “criminals.” **If we center Blackness in creating a new social safety**

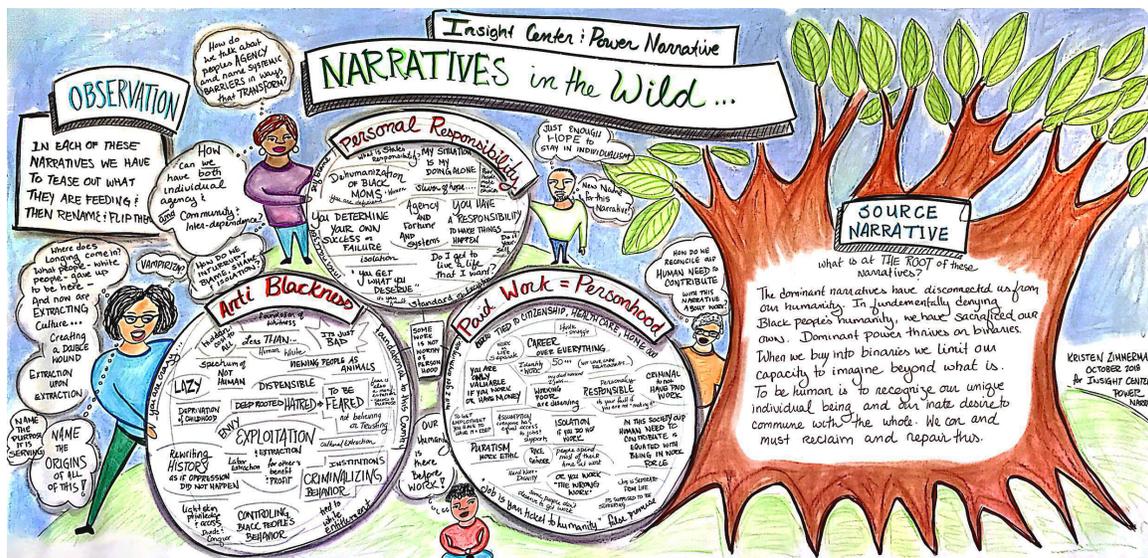
net, we would reject these narratives and assume the good intent and humanity of Black people, which is the opposite of what we do now.

Lastly, it's also crucial to understand how historical policies continue to manifest in the lives of Black people, which can help us reveal new policymaking possibilities. Centering Blackness requires us to imagine how our rules and structures would be organized in a society where anti-blackness doesn't (and didn't) exist. It forces us to begin to break down a deeply embedded mindset, which in itself is a liberating and radical act.

WHERE DOES CENTERING BLACKNESS TAKE US?

COVID-19 has shown us that our country is broken (by design) and that we need deep, structural change. However, those interested in and committed to progressive change in our country are in a conundrum. We know very clearly what we don't want: deep, entrenched inequality along racial and gender lines, an imbalance of power where the wealthy and corporations control our economic resources and politics, and an out of control carceral state which targets Black and Brown communities, to name a few.

But what kind of world, especially in light of COVID and renewed energy and attention to the perils of policing, do we want to create and how do we get there?



We need an alternative framework outside the bounds of white supremacy that gets us to shared abundance and a more just and inclusive society where your race, gender, or immigration status no longer predetermines your life outcomes. **Centering Blackness allows for a completely different worldview to emerge, free from the constraints of white supremacy and patriarchy.** Imagine the possibilities of all our institutions and what it could mean for all of us if we centered Blackness and asked this foundational question: How does what I'm about to create and implement intentionally seek the voices of, lift, and protect Black people? What could we build? What would it allow us to collectively see? And how might we design new rules and institutions with the core goal of enabling Black people to thrive that would also ensure that all people thrive?

Centering Blackness changes the nature of the conversation by providing a pathway to properly diagnose problems and build solutions. It serves as a vehicle to expose the root causes and intersections of multiple anti-black

systems in America, including the social safety net, the rules of our economy, the criminal legal system, health and well-being, and voting. It also sets the stage for healing and transformation.

THE FOUNDATIONAL TENETS OF CENTERING BLACKNESS

Notably, the commitment to centering Blackness can help us achieve the following core tenets that Americans are collectively fighting for:

Shared Abundance

The United States is one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Contrary to popular belief, we are living in a time of incredible prosperity, but this is not felt by most because our abundance is being hoarded—predominantly through anti-black laws, narratives, and practices—denying Black people, and many others, their rightful share. Centering Blackness allows us to rectify this by bringing those who are most at the margins to the center¹⁹, creating shared prosperity for all. Specifically, centering Blackness draws our attention to the social location of Black people in the US as the “miner’s canary” of American democracy.²⁰ In so doing, it allows us to identify the rules, policies, institutions, and systems that specifically harm Black communities and then reimagine bold, transformative policies that lead to racial and economic justice. These policies, although centered in Blackness, end up transforming unjust harms into policies that lead to shared abundance and prosperity for all. For example, Janelle Jones and Jared Bernstein [recently called for](#) the Federal Reserve to specifically focus on raising Black unemployment as it traditionally hovers at double the rate of unemployment for white people.²¹ By targeting policies to specifically address Black unemployment, we are helping the economy writ large. **In other words, other communities of color and white people end up benefiting from a political and policy choice to center Blackness.**

Redefine Safety, Justice, and Threats

Centering Blackness can help us reimagine how we think about safety, justice and what is considered a threat in America. Our current narratives of safety are based on protecting white interests and power. As a result, we have built a justice system and policing infrastructure that deeply harm Black communities, two of the most notable and harmful examples of this reality. White supremacy defines what it means to be safe and what is a threat, and all across the country, grassroots organizations led by communities of color, women, and racial justice advocates are working to redefine safety and focus on public health, human rights, and investing in communities. Many of them seek an invest-divest strategy, also known as defunding the police, which includes diverting money away from the police and prisons and directing it toward social well-being programs, such as drug and alcohol treatment centers, housing, and mental health services. This strategy helps [successfully reduce crime, violence, and incarceration rates in local jurisdictions](#).²² Centering Blackness makes this course of action necessary, and it will allow us to enter into transformative conversations that can break us free from our current policing and criminal punishment system and prisons.²³

Repair Harm and Embark on a Truth and Reconciliation Process

At the core of a truth and reconciliation process is the recognition that injustice took place and a retelling of history that features the voices and experiences of those who survived those injustices. It is a truth-telling of how things came to be, a naming of responsible parties, and an admittance of consequences—intentional or not.

If we want to see real change in America, we have to come to terms with the fact that anti-black sentiment has permeated our history and led to dehumanizing and paternalistic systems that intentionally subjugate and constrict people rather than lift them up. Dehumanization is linked to support for policies that punish or exclude Black people from economic success, such as the continual use of balancing budgets on the backs of Black and Brown communities through criminal legal system fines and fees. We can no longer ignore the irreparable harms and historical trauma inflicted on Black people through our economic policies. One of the first steps in centering Blackness is to reckon with racist histories, both local and national, and the narratives—built on anti-blackness—that shaped those histories.

Rebuild Trust and Relationships between Groups

Rebuilding trust and closing the “trust gap” is an essential condition for a multiracial economy and democracy to not only function but also thrive. Centering Blackness provides pathways to do just that. **This is important because an important body of social science research shows that building trust among different racial groups in intergroup contexts is much more likely if one holds a “social constructionist” belief about race, as opposed to a biological or essentialist one.** On average, Black people tend to see “race” as a social or political construct, not as a biological given, as most eugenics science attempts to have us believe. The experience of Blackness has taught a collective wisdom among Black people that what scholars call “essentialist” or “primordial” constructs of race, rooted in anti-Blackness, are fiction, not fact.

Historically, Black workers often led efforts to organize workers across race and ethnicity in manufacturing industries in the early through the mid-20th century. [Interracial unions](#) were organized in a range of industries from steel and rubber to tobacco under the slogan “Black and white, unite and fight,” helping to build the power of the American labor movement and thus creating a thriving middle class in this country from which everyone benefitted.²⁴

Build Collective Power

Centering Blackness may be one of our greatest hopes to build solidarity and work together to achieve economic equity. It speaks to how power works in America and the role that race, specifically anti-blackness, has played at the center of a system of domination and marginalization. Thus, the liberatory potential of centering Blackness is the light it shines not on Black identity alone; it’s also about exposing the systems of power that operate to marginalize us all, and most important, illuminating the political solidarities needed for liberation.²⁵ Centering Blackness points us to a notion of “linked fate” and interdependence, which—together with a vision of freedom and a politics of solidarity—provides a strategy of transformation and economic liberation.

Bring Dignity, Wholeness, and Humanity to Everyone

Given that Black people are not just one identity (see our discussion on Black people are not a monolith above), Centering Blackness allows us to see the humanity in all types of people who are currently marginalized, especially Black women. Centering Blackness means centering Black transgender people, Black unhoused people, Black essential workers, Black people with disabilities, and so much more. Within all these groups, Black people fare the worst. Focusing on Black people within them then allows for all transgender people, essential workers, and others to be positively impacted as we bring to the center the most marginalized among us. Centering Blackness allows us to see all facets of Black people as fully human and deserving of a dignified life.

BUILDING ON EXISTING, CUTTING-EDGE WORK

Promising work that centers Blackness by Black led organizations already exists, such as the phenomenal Magnolia Mother's Trust, which centers the needs and experiences of extremely low-income, Black women-headed households in a guaranteed income pilot.²⁶ By focusing on low-income Black women, this pilot helps change the narrative on how we as a society see Black women at large.

Last year, we launched The Black Thought Project, which transforms public and private spaces into sanctuaries for the expression of Black thought, making it so non-Black people bear witness to the perspectives, hopes, and dreams of Black people, ultimately challenging previously held views.²⁷

There is also the incredible work happening at The Black Futures Lab and Black Voters Matter, organizations working to build Black political and voting power.²⁸ Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) had been mobilizing and organizing to influence local and national agendas,²⁹ and BYP100 has also created an agenda to build Black futures.³⁰

These are just a few examples of how organizations and movements are leading work that centers Blackness and seeing it as a pathway to liberation for everyone. We can all stand to learn from this incredible work and not shy away from addressing race head-on by centering and honoring Black voices, dreams, and joy.

CONCLUSION

It is becoming increasingly evident that we must ground our work in a proactive vision of what economic liberation means. Anti-blackness is the foundational architecture of the rules that maintain racial oppression and economic exclusion today, so we need a new approach to reassess and reimagine the rules, policies, and narratives that uphold it. In the end, we will continue to be unsuccessful in advancing economic solutions that help all Americans if we are not intentional in grappling with and dismantling anti-blackness. Centering Blackness and the experience of Black people is a framework that allows for possibilities of redemption, reconciliation, and transcendence. It allows us to envision and build a world where anti-blackness does not exist and work toward tangible solutions to benefit all Americans.

Ultimately, this essay is a provocation. It is a calling for an alliance of people and organizations who understand the crucial need to embed a centering Blackness lens and framework into our collective work. Our hope is to build a progressive movement that is not afraid to tackle anti-blackness specifically and racism writ large, and we want to make the impact of centering Blackness—as a framework for policy change as well as a narrative and cultural shift strategy—visible and concrete. We believe that when Black people are made a priority and given the chance to share their true lived experiences, hopes, dreams, and values, our shared understanding of the systems we need to create in and for America will shift. Centering Blackness is the pathway toward an inclusive progressive worldview that actively seeks to dismantle racism and build a better world for all people of all races.

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ENDNOTES

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