

Us and Them: What it Really Means to Belong

By: Nneka Allen

We run,
We run,
We cannot stand these shadows!
Give us the sun.

We were not made
For shade,
For heavy shade,
And narrow space of stifling air
That these white things have made.
We run,
Oh, God,
We run!
We must break through these shadows,
We must find the sun.

~ Langston Hughes, *Shadows*

My people are people of the sun.... In the warmth of its brilliant blanket, my home is found and my stories unfold. Face up, eyes closed, I smile and I breathe easy.

The American Educator Jimmy Neil Smith, wrote, *"We are all storytellers. We all live in a network of stories. There isn't a stronger connection between people than storytelling."*

I believe stories are much more than a book or narrative – they are the way our minds make sense of our lives and the world around us.

Sonia Sanchez the American poet, professor and writer said, *"I write to tell the truth about the black condition as I see it. Therefore, I write to offer a black women's view of the world."*

I am a griot, a storyteller and through my stories, I offer a Black women's truth and perspective. This story is an exploration of power and how it can be used to dehumanize people instead of cultivating belonging. I believe the most impactful way to illuminate these two circumstances is through my own lived experience because justice can be manifested in telling the stories of Black people. This is just one of my stories.

Prologue

This struggle lasted two years. It was painful and exhausting. The violence perpetrated against my humanity was wounding, the curation of indignities designed to force my submission, sickening. Despite the wounds, I was steadfast in my conviction. I refused to be threatened, pressured or degraded into conforming. It didn't matter that I was outnumbered by many white, Black and brown Board members who chose the side of White Power. I had to use my power, my small "p" power to demand change.

I was tired of my professional membership Association cultivating a culture of white elitism and exclusion. The Association and its Board were well-known as cliquish, unkind, closed and very white. They were and still are the largest professional Association of its kind in the world and they have money and power. So, few people challenge them.

And that's why I declined joining the Board when I was originally approached by their outgoing Board President (the "**Old President**"), a brown man who had invested a tremendous amount of energy and time trying to make the Association more relevant and representative. He was intent on "diversifying" the Board before the end of his term. After multiple phone calls with him and a Black male Director (the "**Brother Director**"), I acquiesced. They had convinced me that my voice was needed at their Board table. That was the spring of 2017.

Fast-forward two and a half years and I was resigning. Just as most of my fellow Board members were being granted Committee chair positions. You

see, power had been wielded against me for the last time. My exclusion had been persistent and to escape further physical and psychological trauma and humiliation, resignation was my only healthy option. The Board had secured their goal in the face of my opposition.

A century ago, the German sociologist Max Weber described power as *“the probability that one actor in a social relationship will carry out his own will against the resistance of others.”*

In the week leading up to my resignation, I learned the magnitude of the coordinated power and plan to remove me from the Board, led by the new Board President (the **“New President”**), a white woman I came to realize, based on her behaviour and actions, was thirsty for prestige and power. During my time on the Board she successfully mobilized against me, various people including several Board members mainly racialized as white but also those who identify as Black and brown. She didn’t want me at her Board table because I refused to “fit in” and I dared to speak freely and reveal inequity and racism in our midst. I wanted to belong, but I couldn’t be a part of that Board culture and be who I am. Change was imperative, otherwise, the socially conscious Black members would never have a place to belong inside our Association. However, I soon realized my belonging was not on her mind. Domination through manipulation, lies and hate were her modus operandi. But, before she could fully execute her dehumanizing plan to vote me off the Board, three Black Directors and one white Director resigned. The Board lost four Directors and the Equity Committee dissolved - all at once. And, the Board simply continued business as usual. In fact, the **New President** benefited and continues to benefit from the halo effect of her false fragility, garnering sympathy from white and a few people of colour by using white tears signalling a delicacy reserved only for white women.

When I stand back and reflect on our mass exodus, I see an invitation to explore power and how it can be used to cultivate shared humanity and create belonging or inspire harmful and hateful behaviours thus diminishing our sense of dignity and humanness. While there were several roles that various Board members played, I'm going to focus on the main characters as I see them. Through an exploration of some of the characters involved in this experience and their behaviours, I hope to illuminate the practical ways that assimilation can be demanded, thus invalidating people who do not meet the standards of 'whiteness' and are therefore excluded.

To understand the context of this story we must begin by identifying 'whiteness.' First, it is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a 'standpoint,' a place from which white people look at themselves, others, and society. Third, 'whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked, unnamed and unchallenged.

Meet the "New President"

The Ghanaian diplomat and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Kofi Annan said, *"All the cruel and brutal things, even genocide, start with the humiliation of one individual."*

Shortly before joining the Board in 2017, I was serving a third consecutive year as a mentor in a program designed to support "diverse" fundraisers for this same Association. Like the previous two years, this third year was frustrating and enraging. While the program was meant to support the skills development of fundraisers, a pattern emerged. All of my mentees who were Black women were busy trying to survive and/or escape the racially oppressive environments that were their places of employment. Skills development had to be deprioritized while we focused on their well-being. And so, once again, here I was supporting a third young Black fundraiser to

survive and ultimately escape not one, but three organizations in less than a year.

The third organization on its face had potential given its cause-supporting women and girls internationally and largely in Africa. In fact, its mandate included girls in the country where my mentee's family was from. But, even this opportunity was laced with systemic anti-Black racism. Despite my mentee being the most educated and experienced out of a pool of recent hires, she discovered she was the only new hire to receive a contract position. This precarious employment status was the first clue and early warning sign that she was embarking on yet another traumatic ride.

After several months of surviving incompetent leadership, little communication, and even less support, my mentee was subjected to a random and subjective performance review by her manager. In that unscheduled meeting, the manager gave discriminatory feedback from staff about my mentee's body language while doing her job. And, based on these racist assessments her probationary period was extended despite her objective financial success in the organization. The writing was on the wall. We knew she would have to escape yet another organization.

This abusive treatment is not unfamiliar to Black women. In fact, many of the Black fundraisers in this mentorship program were engulfed in the same exclusionary and abusive treatment. It was clear this organization was unjustifiably attempting to fire my mentee with nothing more than the subjective perspectives of her white colleagues as support. I've heard these messages myself. They often sound like, *"this is not working out, you're just not a fit."* Here's the thing, fitting in is the opposite of belonging. My mentee didn't belong. That was the message.

A few days after this demeaning performance review and only days before the holiday season, my mentee resigned in an act of preserving her dignity

rather than facing the hurt of being fired. She was devastated and I was angry. Indecent and cruel, that's the only way to describe how and what this organization did to this talented young woman.

A couple of days later as I was driving home for the holidays this situation continued to haunt me. I had to do something. As I quietly reflected and searched for a remedy, it occurred to me that the CEO of this organization was also the incoming **New President** of my membership Association. I saw my role and responsibility clearly. I needed to talk with the **New President** about what had happened on her watch. And so, with my mentee's consent, between Christmas and New Year's, I detailed the unjust events that had occurred within her organization. I was sure the **New President** was unaware and so I invited her to connect with me to discuss the matter further. That would not happen for six months and would not yield any material results.

Instead, the **New President** mounted up a defence and initiated an attack that began with virtue signalling.

...the action or practice of publicly expressing opinions or sentiments intended to demonstrate one's good character or the moral correctness of one's position on a particular issue.¹

In writing, she defined herself and her organization by giving me examples of their good character and moral correctness, as if this somehow erased what had happened to my mentee. Her defence over time transformed into an assault that included silencing, erasure, intimidation and diminishment. Her behaviour didn't end there. Over the next two years, she would use white, Black and brown Board members to pressure, embarrass and isolate me. I found myself in the belly of white supremacy culture and in the end, the **New**

¹ Star Wars Puppet, "Urban Dictionary," <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=virching>, July 8, 2017

President made it a priority to inspire disdain for me and ultimately craft a cruel and intentional campaign of exclusion that required the majority of Board members to deny my humanity. Unfortunately, most of them did and some continue to do so today.

My first relationship to fall apart was with my friend, the **Old President**. The one who had recruited me to the Board. The one who agreed the Board table needed my voice. Under the weight of the **New President's** belief that he should "manage me," our relationship crumbled.

In the Canadian Book *Disorientation* by Ian Williams', he explores 10 bullets on 'whiteness'. The 7th bullet is 'Whiteness is Powerful'. He writes, "*We know how powerful something is from the ease with which it accomplishes its desires. Whiteness can do whatever it wants.*"

With ease, the **New President** was pressing down on the **Old President** to achieve her goal of inspiring fear to force my submission. She was unconcerned about the implications of her behaviour and she didn't consider the impact it was having on myself or him, two people of colour.

Instead, the **New President** used her emerging power against me by using my friend. In the hierarchy of race, brown people often have power in these situations that they don't feel they can use. This only illuminates the palpable fear and crushing pressure to conform to white supremacy culture. He knew, like all people of colour know, there were consequences for resisting 'whiteness' and so he encouraged me to leave the Board and join a more "progressive" table, the Association's international Board. I declined. White power was being wielded against us and I could not ignore the racism my mentee had experienced or that now I too was in its cross-hairs as a target. The **Old President** resigned early before the end of his term.

When pursuing racial justice, I believe it is important to understand the chasm between the idea of having unapologetic Black people contributing authentically to an organization and the reality of Black-conscious participation. This experience was full of disappointments for me. The temporary loss of my relationship with the **Old President** was shocking and profound.

With the early departure of my friend, the attacks didn't end. The **New President** simply enlisted others to do her bidding.

Meet whom I will call the “Undercover Director.”

The (“**Undercover Director**”) joined the Board the same year I did, but I would soon learn this white woman was on the fast track to the Presidency. She became the eyes and ears for the **New President** at the Equity Committee table, a sub-committee of the Board.

Upon joining the Board, the Equity Committee for the first time was handed to a Black woman, (the “**Sister Director**”). We had both joined the Board together and the opportunity was exciting to transform this portfolio with a fellow woman of colour. There were many changes needed inside our Association if they were going to truly prioritize equity and justice. Together, we were energized about the work, but strangely, the past Committee Chair who was also a white woman did not want to cede control to my **Sister Director**. She unilaterally decided just as power was to be relinquished, the Committee needed to be co-chaired, which meant my **Sister Director** had to get approval from the past chair for all of our work. There was no other Committee Chair in our Association required to share power like this on the Board. The past Committee Chair was disempowering the **Sister Director's** leadership, resulting in an oppressive environment.

‘Whiteness Oppresses’ is the eighth point on ‘whiteness’ in Ian Williams’ book. He writes, *“Oppression and power are related. Oppression is a means*

to secure and maintain power. Whiteness partners with other agents to oppress others.”

Through this inequity, we believed the past Committee Chair was planning to limit our activism to maintain the status quo. Therefore, when the inequity of co-chairing the Equity Committee was confronted, the past Chair begrudgingly released control and shockingly resigned from the Board shortly thereafter. And, who was waiting to take her place? None other than the **Undercover Director**. She quickly stepped in to oversee and report on our activities, ultimately safeguarding the imbalance of power.

In one of our final Equity Committee meetings, out of fear of losing control, the **Undercover Director** told our majority Black committee that we were not representative. On the only committee inside this Association where Black people were in the majority, we were being accused of being exclusionary. Her covert unabashed warning was - our committee lacked “diversity” and was “too Black”, while all the other committees, with a majority of white members, were not a cause for concern. This was the perspective and belief of our Association in what is today the most diverse city in the world. This was a warning to us and we heard it. Our membership Association wasn’t interested in the liberation of Indigenous, Black and brown people in our profession. They simply wanted to appear equitable without practicing equity.

With ease, the **Undercover Director** shared her racism in our faces. And in return for her loyalty to the status quo, the **Undercover Director** was crowned the President-Elect by the **New President** in the absence of a Board vote. In true dictator-like style, the **New President** pronounced the **Undercover Director’s** promotion at a Board meeting. And, in that processless manner, the **Undercover Director became** the President-Elect of our membership Association. The writing was on the wall. I did not belong, my **Sister Director** did not belong and they wanted the Equity Committee to know it. They desperately wanted me to leave the Board and if I wasn’t

prepared to do it 'voluntarily' they remained ready to devise a plan to remove me. And plan they did.

Meet the “‘Ally’ Director.”

In the book *What White People Can Do Next*, Emma Dabiri writes, *“One of the things that allyship fails to address is the fact that you can continue to view black people as inferior while still being committed to their protection.”*

While the **New President’s** growing posse planned my removal, the Equity Committee worked. We developed a strategic Equity Plan that would confront this historic behaviour of anti-Blackness, first through education. We wanted to change our experience at the Board table and for Association members. We dared to put this ugly truth on the table of this white elitist Association marrying it with solutions created by Black people.

In the midst of our work, there seemed to be an ally of our strategic Equity Plan; the (**“‘Ally’ Director”**). She was a white female Board member, who in many regards appeared to be a supporter of mine and the work being done by the Equity Committee at the time. However, in the end, she too buckled under the weight to conform and she joined and sided with the White power wielded by the **New President**.

Bullet 6 in Ian Williams’ book states, ‘Whiteness Contradicts Itself.’ He writes, *“Few things are more formidable than the intersection of white patriarchy. Whiteness can be misogynistic while protecting white women.”*

The **‘Ally’ Director** had contradictions. It is unclear exactly when her contradictions emerged, but I know they began with language, words and private meetings held among some Board members. These were secret meetings that didn’t include me or some of the other Black Board members.

In *Atlas of the Heart*, Brene Brown writes, *“Language matters. It’s the raw material of story, it changes how we feel about ourselves and others and it’s a portal to connection. With the same amount of power, language can also be used to strip people of their dignity and humanity.”*

And I believe once the **‘Ally’ Director** listened to and believed the undignified and false stories shared about me, she became a bystander. We may think by-standing is harmless when in truth it is dangerous. Instead of asking me about the falsehoods being shared, she simply didn’t raise it with me until after I resigned. The research of Robert Sternburg offers some insight into this phenomenon.

He explains that *“...hate moves from place to place on a “current” and it needs this current to grow and travel... those currents are provided by cynical leaders who capitalize on people’s insecurities to bolster their own power... When instigators seek to gain traction for their leadership by spreading hate, they often attract observer(s) who do nothing or who, over time, move from being observers to being participant/observers to being active participants... the more the leaders whip up powerful stories, even ones of hate, the more people follow them.”*

The **‘Ally’ Director** and I have not spoken since my resignation.

Meet the “Sellout Director.”

As a precaution and to maintain the spectre of “diversity,” I believe the **New President** and Board Nominating Committee invited some new token Directors to the Board to proactively stabilize their “racially inclusive” image. One of those people was a Black woman who joined the Board a year after my arrival. She had the profile and prestige the Association usually required in a prospective Board member. She checked all the ‘model minority’ boxes and she wasted no time in strategically befriending me.

Many times, I suspected she was playing the role of a double agent. Despite joining dinner meetings with me and other Black fundraisers and feigning sisterhood, I would discover the ("**Sellout Director**") to be the author of a lie designed to tarnish my professional reputation and oust me from the Board. I learned about her conspiracy with the **New President** and that she too in fact was an active participant in the racist abuse acted out against me. And in the end, it was another Black woman, a "pseudo sister", whose behaviour contributed to my exclusion and ultimate resignation.

In what I believe was the **Sellout Director's** desire to align herself with the power of the **New President**, I learned that she accused me of breaching the confidentiality of the Board by including non-Board members in my email communications. Something that was easily verifiable as inaccurate and untrue. Had the **Sellout Director** and those involved in hastily reaching that conclusion about my email communications been inclined to be open and even-handed, or to approach the matter with impartiality and transparency, fair process would demand that I would have been consulted about this. I would have provided evidence and would have confirmed that in fact only Board members were included in my Board correspondences. But since I was excluded from the discussion about the recipients of my emails, the Board drew a negative assumption about me without my input.

There was also one other possible valid reason that might have provided a potential justification for my removal from the Board, were it not based on clearly false information. The **New President** suggested that I breached the Association's Code of Conduct regarding conflict of interest in the Equity Plan presented to the Board by the Equity Committee. The **New President** made the claim that the proposed plan stipulated that I was to receive compensation for my role in the proposed training. Again, this too was verifiably false. A simple review of the Equity Plan made it clear that there was never an intention or expectation for me to be compensated, but the

Equity Plan was never shared with the Board for their review. Therefore, there was no objective basis to force and trigger my removal from the Board.

In the end, the **New President** abdicated her proper leadership responsibility. Instead, she used her Presidency and joined up with a group of Board members, leaning the weight of her position with the intent to remove me, a Black woman, whom she simply had disagreements with about the realities of racism and inequity in our membership Association.

It was only after my resignation that I became aware of the reasons the **New President** was using as a basis to revoke my directorship which were replete with ethical and leadership concerns.

You see, I believe it is a very problematic practice when a small group of Board members makes decisions, devises policies and processes outside the purview of the entire Board without formal guidelines or directions. What results is the ability of those in power to randomly and indiscriminately introduce new decisions, policies and processes at Board meetings to suit their own agendas.

This is precisely what occurred in September of 2019 when without notice to me or the full Board, the **New President** tabled a motion eliminating disbursements for travel. You see, the majority of the Board meetings required me to travel to Toronto and I was the only Board member living 2 hours outside the GTA. The lack of process and disrespectful leadership behaviour was clearly designed to humiliate me in front of the Board, which included new members who were attending for the first time. This degrading and exclusionary act was intensely harmful and one that defied the Board's "commitment to equity and access" in removing barriers to participation.

I challenged the change in policy at the meeting to no avail. No Board member was able to arrest the troubling undemocratic practice that the **New**

President had set in motion. This behaviour was an aggravating factor behind the racial inequity that I had experienced during my term as a Board member. While there had been dehumanizing “behind-the-scene” acts perpetrated against me by the **New President**, this was her first openly declared public action. Her anger towards me had grown over the years because of my determination to name racist abuse and my expectation that the Board would be courageous and bold in addressing inequities and injustices within the Association as well as on the Board.

At that September meeting, the **New President** used that motion to change the travel policy as a point of division and decision. Those who were for and against Nneka. While I served as the flash point, ultimately, it was a division of ideals; those who were in favour of the status quo way of running the Association, and those advocating for real change, leading to a more equitable and just organization.

In the many email communications among Board members after this meeting, the **New President** issued thinly veiled threats of litigation against me. She wrote of retaining counsel and a claim of defamation and loss of reputation. The **New President** went so far as to undemocratically demand I take back my opinion about her racist behaviour, as a condition of my continuing to serve on the Board. If I was prepared to acquiesce I would be allowed to stay and keep my seat at the table. The Board failed to use this challenge of racism as an opportunity for growth and chose instead to bury its head in the sand, while quietly taking sides.

Between September and November, many calls for resolution were made. This included the intervention of my **Brother Director** who stepped in to attempt to salvage this situation. He personally met with the **New President** to implore her to pursue immediate independent mediation. In his conversation with the **New President**, she admitted that behind the scenes she and up to six other Board members were planning to resign from the

Board if I remained. That plot was connected to a plan to make a motion at the November meeting to remove me from the Board, while I was present. Just one more planned indignity. Instead, I chose to resign and save myself from their intentional assault. In the parting words of my resignation letter, I too called for the Board to engage in independent mediation to resolve and repair this situation. To this day my request has not been answered.

Maybe you're wondering how the **New President** could have done this, and why the other Board members followed her lead, especially the Black and brown Board members.

Brene Brown offers an answer, she writes *"Dehumanization often starts with creating an enemy image. As we take sides, lose trust and get angrier and angrier, we not only solidify an idea of our enemy, but also start to lose our ability to listen, communicate and practice even a modicum of empathy."*

You should know after my resignation, the **Sellout Director** wrote me an email, saying she was sorry to see me resign under "these circumstances" never admitting the truth about her role in my resignation. In my written response to her, I shared this quote from an article entitled, *8 Ways People of Colour are Tokenized in Nonprofits*. The article talks about people of colour being used by white people as a mouthpiece and shield against other people of colour. The article points out, *"The reality is that the tokenized person of colour has no more power than before, with the racial hierarchy remaining the same and leaving issues of race "at our level" for people of colour to mentally fight it out amongst ourselves."*²

I believe what Audre Lorde says about guilt reveals a motive behind the **Sellout Director's** final message to me. Lorde writes, *"guilt...is a response to*

² <https://medium.com/the-nonprofit-revolution/8-ways-people-of-color-are-tokenized-in-non-profits-32138d0860c1>

one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful since then it is no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness."

And based on our email exchange, hers was a guilt-filled effort to protect the status quo. It is a sad day when Black people are complicit in the oppression of other Black people, but I know that white supremacy culture doesn't just live in people racialized to be white. White supremacy culture produces racism, and racism is the water we all swim in.

Unless we actively resist the dominant culture, we will perpetrate the harm of white supremacy, no matter our race. While this is true, there is little comfort in this knowledge. The only way Black communities have survived historic atrocities is through solidarity with each other. This experience was a sore reminder about the power and pressure that 'whiteness' inflicts on us.

Emma Dabiri writes, *"Whiteness is always there, ever-present, determining who gets a chance, and who is denied opportunity."*

'Whiteness' is the necessary context needed to understand racism. My story is a story of racist exclusion. I believe my story shares tangible lessons about how racism behaves, and how it oppresses even in the absence of original cruel intentions. And sometimes to understand a concept we first must be exposed to its opposite. That is my offering through this story, which brings me to belonging. So what is it?

Brene Brown offers us a vivid definition, she writes, "Belonging is *"the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you*

can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness.”

Take a moment and experience what that might look and feel like. The freedom to share your most authentic self with the world. Breathe that in and imprint that on your heart and mind. Now consider how might these images and feelings influence your every decision. I leave you with that exercise.

Epilogue

You may be wondering, where are all these folx today? Within the last two years, a few Board members apologized to me for the role they played in the events that led to my resignation. One restored relationship was with the **Old President**, who shared with me one of the most profound apologies of my life. I am grateful to have him in my life again and for those who through their actions have demonstrated their commitment to change.

*Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela the author of *A Human Being Died That Night*, wrote, “...A sincere apology does not seek to erase what was done. No amount of words can undo past wrongs. Nothing can ever reverse injustices committed against others. But an apology pronounced in the context of horrible acts has the potential for transformation. It clears or “settles” the air in order to begin reconstructing the broken connections between two human beings.”*

And that’s what two of my brown colleagues did. They repaired the broken connections between us; our relationships are richer and more beautiful because of our mutual commitment to honesty and humility.

As for all the other characters highlighted in my story, each of them has been promoted or awarded since my Board tenure. The **Ally Director** became the chair of the Education Committee, one of the largest of the Association’s

portfolios. The **Undercover Director** is now the past Board President and the **Sellout Director** is the Association's first Black female President. And while preparing this story, I learned that earlier this month, the Association awarded the main perpetrator in this experience, the **New President**, with an Outstanding Professional Award.

Ijeoma Oluo, author of *Mediocre: The Dangerous Legacy of White Male America* wrote, *"While we would like to believe otherwise, it is usually not the cream that rises to the top; our society rewards behaviors that are actually disadvantageous to everyone. Studies have shown that the traits long considered signs of strong leadership (like overconfidence and aggression) are in reality disastrous in both business and politics."*

Afterword

So when we step back and look at this story, what do we see? What is at work here?

To begin we must first accept that this story is not devoid of history. In fact, it emerges out of history and can only be understood through a historical context. The **New President's** shaming violation of me and other Board members was not random. Although perhaps perpetuated unconsciously, it was rooted in the historic caste system of North America that places Europeans on top and Africans on the bottom. Through this hierarchy, the system and its leaders delineated and apportioned power.

Second, the common concern that runs through history and this story is about power and how it is used. Too often we do not recognize the tools used to uphold white supremacy culture, mainly because it is designed to hide in plain sight while oppressing and traumatizing people of colour in our organizations and in society. And sadly on the spectrum of power inside this racial caste system, we sometimes find brown people with a greater portion

of power. I believe what they do with that power is vital in the struggle for racial justice.

Third, mine wasn't simply an isolated act of racism. The behaviour described in my story emerges from a culture that is cultivated, promoted and protected. And the ultimate power behind the individual acts of dehumanization and exclusion are strengthened by the dominant 'white' culture and its emerging systems. This culture can be internalized by people of colour and instead of resisting the injustice that could soon be wielded against them, they join in with the perpetrators some out of fear, others out of ignorance. Ultimately, they are tokenized and pitted against other people of colour.

And lastly, I believe it is evident from what I have shared that the resignations of three Black Directors, including my Brother and Sister Directors as well as all the members of colour on the Equity Committee, was not a flight of fancy. It was the result of frustration stemming from the consistent exclusion of our voices and opinions in our efforts to tackle tough issues relating to racial injustice.

Some might want to believe that the issues that emerged on the Board around our resignations were personal matters. They were not. You see the **New President** and my Board colleagues didn't have to be "bad people" to act this way. Similarly being "good" does not preclude us from perpetrating racism. And my supporters and I aren't necessarily "good people." We are anti-racists and this distinction requires some understanding. Racism is not a person, it is a behaviour. We are anti-racists because of our actions, because we resist and fight racism wherever we find it.

This means good and bad people have the capacity to behave in racist ways. When we reduce the systemic oppression of white supremacy culture and

racism to an individual we lose sight of the biggest culprit - the culture and systems we create that uphold racial inequity and injustice.

Brene Brown at the end of her definition of belonging writes, *"True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are."*

Belonging will require us to relinquish power voluntarily. So what does that look like for you?

What has to change in your environment so that Black people can be their whole selves? What do you have to do differently so everyone can belong?

How do you have to be different, so everyone can be powerful?

Only some organizations have the courage to confront inequity and racism and commit to change. And an even smaller group is successful and many are not.

We run,
Oh, God,
We run!
We must break through these shadows,
We must find the sun.³

Hugging my skin like a warm blanket, I slowly open my eyes, breathe deeply, and exhale. No words are necessary, I feel this in my body. It is a deep and secure knowing. I know where I am. I am right where I belong. In the warmth of the sun.

³ Hughes, Langston, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, First Vintage Classics Edition. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1994), p.34

Nneka Allen is a Black woman and a descendant of the Underground Railroad. Her African ancestors had a historic relationship with the First Peoples of Canada and as result, the Cherokee and the Ojibwe are also her relations. She is a 6th generation Canadian and a Momma.

Born in the 70s, Nneka was raised during a time of Black power and acute political awareness in North America. As a result, the air in her childhood home was generous, brilliant and proud. Her parents and their siblings with great intentionality poured their consciousness into her multi-ethnic identity.

Today Nneka Allen is a relationship builder, a stone-catcher, a freedom fighter and a storyteller. As a lover of justice, she has inspired philanthropy as a Fundraising Executive in the charitable sector for nearly 25 years. Emerging from the isolation and exclusion she experienced as the only Black woman in her places of employment, Nneka gave birth to The Empathy Agency Inc in 2018.

As a Professional Certified Coach, Nneka helps leaders and their teams deliver more fairly on their missions by exploring the impact identity has on culture and equity outcomes. She facilitates the Anti-Racism Strategies for The Workplace course through Extended Learning at UBC.

Nneka is the founder of the Black Canadian Fundraisers' Collective, a group of fundraisers who inspire and elevate the philanthropic sector in the African tradition of Ubuntu - "I am because we are". And she is an award-winning author and joint editor of a book featuring the first-person narratives of 15 Black contributors, mainly fundraisers from the United States and Canada called [Collecting Courage: Joy, Pain, Freedom, Love](#).

Nneka believes that belonging is as crucial to our well-being as love and without either we suffer. Cultivating belonging is her life's work and the driving force behind her activism.

Nneka's ultimate joy is her daughter Destiny and her husband Skylar, who are both Environmental Scientists and philanthropists. Along with their dogs Sophi and Sammi they live and work on the unceded shared territory of the Sumas and Matsqui First Nations, colonially known as Abbotsford, British Columbia. As forced inhabitants of these beautiful territories, she honours the original keepers of this land.