

# Matters of the Heart in a Movement:

## A conversation with 2019 Fellow Micky Bradford

*(Transcribed and lightly edited from a conversation  
in August, 2019)*



The heart connection is crucial and will always be crucial. It's what makes the work powerful—and also difficult. You have to be vulnerable with people, you have to be real, you have to bring yourself. I think that's what makes the trans justice movement so different from other movements; we have to rely on each other in such a different way.

It's not always being able to see each other; it's also about being able to make space for each other, even when we're not all in the same room.

In this moment, it feels like trans people across the board are claiming space in a different way, feeling bold as shit, and calling people out, not only in a callout culture way but in a *calling out power* way. This was not the case when I first started organizing. We weren't in that place yet as a movement—to be able to call things out, able to be bolder.

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During this grantmaking fellowship, I wanted to be very clear what the criteria were that we were looking for; how they reflect community values; how they reflect my values. I needed to be proud of those decisions. That's really hard to do when you have 241 applications, and they're all so amazing, doing good work, and all struggling.

People are framing their work and talking about what they need clearly, in a very matter-of-fact way, while also leaning into being like, "Fuck this, we're going to do our own shit, we're going to make our own shit. We don't need 501(c)(3) structures, we don't need this or that—we're going to do it all." A lot of what I read in the applications felt so anti-corporate: people doing away with old structures. Our community sees that TJFP is open to that and will fund you no matter how radical the work is.

On the other hand, there were groups that had learned their language from the HIV and public health sectors, and really weren't thinking about community organizing or how to make change. Their applications were more focused on how to bring participants into a medical or

public health establishment. This isn't how I work, but with these groups, I was like, "I feel for you and see you and know you're trying to make change in the ways that have been presented to you." This work is how a lot of people first learn about models of change, and it is an entry point for a lot of organizers.

The second day of the funding panel is when things really dawned on me. For some of these groups, we're deciding whether or not they're going to be around in the next year or two.

That was really hard realization for me. I wanted to fund stuff that's revolutionary, radical, and visionary. I also know that people are working within all kinds of confines, like needing to stay at an organization that will pay them, since some places won't hire folks like us because we're being Black or trans or don't have enough experience.

This means that for a lot of people, groups, and organizations, TJFP is their bread-and-butter funding. Other funding sources might be telling them their work has to be tied to a particular program or grant deliverable, whereas TJFP offers general operating, unrestricted funds, which means it can be used for whatever is best for people's communities. Having that type of flexibility definitely changes how people are able to approach shit.

## An Offering on Giving with Intention

Giving money should be more intentional. Because of our different relationships to money and the different ways we learn to talk about and relate to money, awarding grants should be coupled with optional training around money management with a social justice framework, to equip folks who are getting that money. So many of these things are not actually taught in a course-specific way. You either come into this knowledge



Chukson Healing Market, Tucson, AZ, 2019 TJFP Grantee

because you're raised by or around people who have this knowledge, or you don't.

I'd like to see funders shift and say that it is our responsibility to give the money and also offer a level of tailored support to groups to do what they need and want, so that they don't just replicate some of the weird stuff about philanthropy.

## Intersections of Culture and Politics in our Movement

I was surprised by the amount of cultural work happening around the country. I learned about a group in Queens, New York, doing theatre-based work and I liked what they were doing and thinking about engaging in theatre. A group in Kansas City is working with theatre and the ballroom scene, mixing their policy and advocacy with underground organizing.

I didn't know folks were doing this kind of work, because I don't know folks in Kansas City and I didn't know folks in Queens.

Reading about these groups... I was just stunned! I've been doing work like this in the South for years. It felt big to read about other folks who are also thinking about the intersections of cultural organizing and how we can use them!

### **What does it mean to give trans people access to making our own media that reflects our culture?**

The House of Pentacles has been one example where I've gotten to feel and question this firsthand. When I first started my fellowship with the House of Pentacles, I hadn't held a camera—I hadn't done anything yet. But I knew there was power in being able to train people how to capture and edit a moment that they themselves had experienced, and how to put it out there for consumption.

When I talk to some of the Black trans women who have informed the agenda of the National TGNC Coalition, there's a lot of just being tired of having to respond to violence and death and there's that push and pull where it comes to visibility. It's like they are now asking what's going on with this, how can we bring attention to this—and you're also on the back end, reporting on something that's already happened, rather than putting out a piece that's like: here's our lives before all this violence; here are our lives outside of the violence; here's the joy in being trans and Black and living in the south, living with HIV, living with disabilities... all the things that make us beautiful.

I don't know exactly what's keeping everyone together other than the little moments of visibility we can jump onto. I think specifically that *Pose* and the *Pose* stars have shifted conversations for some folks. The show has given trans people visibility and a feeling of connection to folks who are seemingly living



Nuui Waav Brotherhood, Detroit, MI, 2019 TJFP Grantee

a life that is not as violent and a struggle and dark. It gives people hope.

**I don't know what else folks are really relying on, because all we really have is each other. That's what I rely on—the people I have right here.**

As long as I've been doing this organizing with SONG (Southerners on New Ground), I have been asking folks, "What is your vision for a South where trans folks are free?"

It was hard for folks to vision what they wanted, rather than what they didn't want or what we wanted to tear down or where we needed to intervene—that was all easy to name. That came like that [snaps], but other things like, "What do we put in place of the police?" or "What do we put in place of whatever-fucked-up-structure-there-is-now?"... It was just crickets.



We need other ways to help us vision another world. If we engaged folks with different art mediums, to draw, do some free meditation, and relax and try to focus on what it could look like, I feel like we start to get it. When folks start to put their dreams together and speak out loud about what could happen, what they've been afraid to actually name—it's beautiful. It's liberation.

I really want to push people into that hard heart space where they're pushing for what they deserve, not just what they think they can get.

I see it happen on an individual level, and then I see it on a structural level: policies are proposed that do not envision a world where we're all free. Often it's, "This is what we're going to do policy-wise." Then, "Here's the reform we're going to push for." It feels like we're just working for what we feel like we can get, not what we feel like we *should* get or what we deserve.

We are so often presented with what's viable under this administration, and I'm tired of it. That way of thinking hasn't served us and it doesn't allow us to vision. Anything that instead allows us to exercise that muscle and see not just a year out, but twenty, forty years out—that is what I'm trying to push myself and other folks to do.

## A Focus on Criminalization and Accountability

There's so much focus on issues other than the criminalization of our communities and I can't say enough that I don't like it. Focusing on anything else doesn't address the needs of Black people, of Black trans people, of poor people, of sex workers, of disabled folks, of people living with HIV.

Issues around criminalization are top priority. I'm often met with folks who meet this with, "Isn't it also important to make sure there are nondiscrimination clauses and protections for people? Access to identity documents? Isn't it also important to make sure people have access to public spaces like bathrooms?"

Yes, all of that is important. But at the end of the day, if we cannot stop our people from being exploited and really abused by the state in jails, detention centers, by police, or any law enforcement, then what are we doing?

There's a conversation brewing about accountability between Black trans women and the cis men that harm us. When I first started getting into this work and having these conversations, folks were very adamant about hate crime legislation and sending cis men to jail. I've seen that shift a lot over the years.



Left: Trans Lab, New York, NY, 2019 TJFP Grantee; right: Gender Justice LA and Friends, Los Angeles, CA, 2019 TJFP Grantee

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More and more Black trans femmes in particular are using abolition as a guide and saying, "All right, even though I really want these men locked up and as far away as possible from me and other women they've caused harm to, I recognize that isn't doing a damn thing. It doesn't keep us safe and doesn't do anything for those men either... so what is the alternative?" We're still trying to figure out the alternative, but we're at the point where more people are asking these questions, and I see that reflected in community. We're trying to be different with each other—we're trying to be gentler, to hold space, to have space for alternatives instead of punishment and isolation.

In our future, I see joy. I see us modeling a whole different way of being with each other. I see us being real free. Not having that tension in your shoulders or in your back that you've learned to carry by being Black, being trans. I see us figuring out how to do accountability differently.

We need each other in ways other groups of people don't necessarily need each other. That necessity means that we have to treat each other better.

I think we're learning slowly that. Learning we can't say "fuck you" to everybody. We can't survive on our own and we're not meant to survive on our own. No one really is.

Trans\*Ponder, Eugene, OR, 2019 TJFP Grantee



## Our Growing Legacy

There's something really grounding about having a trans legacy of movement building. I'm really grateful for being in the room with the people who were part of the TJFP 2019 grantmaking fellowship.

The word legacy keeps coming into my head. We're a cohort within this legacy of trans people who have made these funding decisions; everybody who applies to TJFP is entering into this legacy; and TJFP is leaving a legacy of how to do this work. There's a need for doing funding in ways that center community needs, and I think TJFP does that really well.

Whenever I feel isolated, lonely, without direction, or feel like the work is not connecting, this is what I always return to. What is the legacy we stand on? What are the ways in which we know this is the right way, the right move, the right direction? I know that by the people that have come before me.

What we're doing with this fund is expanding opportunities for folks to come into that legacy, to claim that legacy, and to carry that legacy forward.