



PHOTOS BY TATYANA WELLS & AHNNA SCOTT

Womanist Working Collective members at a time banking workshop in 2017.

Reciprocity

A Time Banking Project of the Womanist Working Collective

By LaTierra Piphus

ESTABLISHED IN OCTOBER 2015 as an affinity group on Meetup, our collective began gathering as a group of like-minded Black women and femmes. Responding to our almost immediate growth and increased membership, we held our first strategic planning meeting in February 2016 following a collective-wide qualitative survey to gather vital feedback from our membership. From this data and ongoing evaluations, we began to shape and expand what was quickly evolving into an intentional Community of Practice centering the livelihood and quality of life for Black womyn, trans women, femmes, and gender variant folks. Today, we continue building around the needs and feedback from our members to achieve our ultimate goal: Black Liberation!

The Womanist Working Collective is a social action and support collective for Black womyn (both cis & trans), femmes, and gender variant folks. Our work unapologetically centers our quality of life and livelihoods through community organizing, philanthropy and self-care.

Our goals are:

1. To become a supportive and empowering community network to move past merely surviving, but thriving; prioritizing physical, emotional, moral, and social safety;
2. To transition ourselves and our communities into an ecologically just¹ society; and
3. Black Liberation.

Standing on the Shoulders of Our Ancestors

Currently, one of our acts of self-determination is our time banking project, which is a practical tool that enables cooperation through the act of exchanging time spent on

¹ Ecological Justice is the state of balance between human communities and healthy ecosystems based on thriving, mutually beneficial relationships and participatory self-governance. We see Ecological Justice as the key frame to capture our holistic vision of a better way forward.

providing services, pooling resources or connecting folks to new networks of support.

Self-determination means developing solutions to common problems we're facing as a collective. We started our time bank to (1) incentivize membership engagement both within the collective and outside in our local neighborhoods, (2) mobilize the resources we have to meet our own needs, and (3) to divest from capitalism and reinvest in our own systems, people and collective futures.

Time banking divests from capitalism by investing in cooperation and solidarity economies. Unlike capitalism, time banking values all time and services equally: One hour of time=one hour, whether you are a doctor or a stay-at-home parent.

Capitalism has conditioned us to believe people's time is worth more based on how much money they make, how productive they are deemed in this society, and how much others value them. We must divest from this way of classist thinking and the assumption that someone with a higher income or access to more resources is better than someone with a lower income and less access to resources. We must invest in the understanding that we are all inherently valuable simply because we exist, instead of basing our value on what we produce to line the pockets of the ruling class.

In the U.S. and in many other imperialist nations, the wealth of this country was built on the backs of enslaved African and Indigenous peoples. This means the entire capitalist structure of the U.S. was developed atop the subjugation of these groups positioned securely at the bottom of class mobility. The tragic system of capitalism does not work if there are not people at the bottom to maintain the concentrated wealth and power at the top, as with any pyramid scheme.

Both during and in the aftermath of slavery, Black communities in the U.S. created ways to cooperate with the limited resources to which they had access. For example, Fannie Lou Hamer's farming cooperative; Frederick Douglass' mutual aid society; Charles and Shirley Sherrod's New Communities, Inc.; and Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign were all acts of self-determination developed for the survival and sustenance of Black communities. Black people used these strategies of mutualism as a means to center racial and economic justice as cornerstones to Black Liberation. To do this work today, we have to talk about our history and remind ourselves to always look back as it informs much of our present day: *Sankofa!*

These are our ancestors. These are the shoulders we stand on.

Fk Capitalism**

The exploitation of our bodies, labor and time continues today while systemic and cultural influences expand to support the deci-

mination of our community's sustainability.

Under capitalism, our time is stolen and exploited through both paid labor and our forced entry into the criminal (in)justice system, also known as modern day slavery.

Imagine you're locked up for a *survival crime* like stealing to feed yourself or performing sex work to shelter your family. You now have to pay with your time, fines and court fees to this system. The same capitalist system that creates the conditions in which you can't adequately support yourself or your family is now penalizing you for participating in an *alternative economy* to survive and sustain yourself.

Something clearly needs to change, but no amount of band-aids will fix this wounded beast. This is why we must divest in order to dismantle these systems; targeting the issue at its root.

Time Poverty & Community Breakdown: The Curse that Keeps on Giving

Capitalism's increasingly neoliberal demands for the working class' labor to be exploited harder and longer on unlivable wages for corporations that strategically divest from our communities and our world's overall ecology, leaves less time for us to invest in our families, friends, community, and local politics. This inevitably breeds distrust, community breakdown and increases mental health issues like depression, anxiety and isolation.

In our society, we value time and labor very differently depending on who someone is and what they do with their time. The eight hour work shift of a public school teacher is valued much less than a venture capitalist even though the labor of the teacher is for the public good versus the private good (read: greed) of the capitalist.

Income and time inequality has a corrosive effect on communities, true democracy, and the well-being of society's most economically vulnerable.

Stemming from this system are neoliberalism's disposability politics to which low-income and other marginalized groups are highly subjected. Disposability politics, coined by Henry Giroux, describes "a politics where the imperatives of the market come at the expense of public life, democracy, and responsibility toward the future."² In this society, you are disposed of if you are poor, homeless, disabled, primarily supported by the underground economy, or unable to work/have your labor exploited by this system. Folks in marginalized communities are frequently part of this disposable population as most as this system does not see them as valuable. Disposability politics is literally the opposite of ecological justice.

2 truth-out.org/opinion/item/32629-revisiting-hurricane-katrina-racist-violence-and-the-politics-of-disposability

Neoliberalism has disposed of members of our communities on a macro scale through nationwide gentrification, neoliberal policies that prioritize the market over the people, devolution of social safety nets like public health care, subsidized housing and food stamps—which are often necessary to supplement even full-time workers—targeted structural inequality and poverty. The impact is that people who are hit the hardest economically and socially are low-income and communities of color; the same populations of which our collective is composed.

Time Banking as an Exercise in Self-Determination

Time banking is an intervention into disposability politics, acting as a type of barter network that primarily uses time and acts of service as currency, which by definition values all time equally. Time banking recognizes that everyone, even those defined as disadvantaged or vulnerable, has something worthwhile to contribute. This alternative economic practice values relationships that are forged through reciprocity. As mentioned before, this method of pooling resources, funds and skills is not new to Black folks; there has been a deliberate divestment from ALL things meant to sustain us and create our own systems.

Cooperation through time banking and other types of solidarity economy practices suggests an alternative method of tapping into the abundance of human resources that meets people's needs and promotes well-being for all. It also increases resilience in individuals and communities in order to prevent needs from arising, reduces the reliance on capitalism, and safeguards resources for meeting unavoidable needs by strengthening what Edgar Cahn defines as the "Core Economy," or "Family, neighbourhood, community... [who produce] love and caring, coming to each other's rescue, democracy and social justice."

The benefits of participating in time banking are endless, but here are a few that may resonate with you:

- It's a friendship primer! Time banking teaches you how to build sustainable friendships with trust, mutuality and support. You may find that the person fulfilling your "request" for a ride to your first ultrasound appointment is also a parent and has a wealth of knowledge you can tap into.
- It ensures collaboration and resource sharing amongst community members and partnering organizations.
- It unleashes an abundance of human relationships, time, social networks, knowledge, and skills based on lived experience that are natural and semi-permanent resources.
- It creates sustainable systems of support.
- It emphasizes mutualism over rugged individualism.
- It creates a sense of membership rather than being a

beneficiary or passive consumer—you're now an active participant with vested interest and time.

- It allows reciprocity to build trust between people, which fosters mutual respect.
- It builds physical and mental well-being through strengthening relationships.

One of the biggest goals of this project and ongoing practice is to participate, regardless of how small, in the eradication of the systems of oppression. The goal is to "Starve & Stop" through divesting and dismantling capitalism. These are some of the main systems we've identified that can be directly addressed through our time banking efforts:

Divesting from:

- Neo-liberalism's Disposability Politics
- Imperialism/Colonization
- Capitalism
- Rugged Individualism
- Internalized Oppressions (i.e. Poverty-shaming)

Investing in:

- Self-determination
- Increasing collective members engagement & participation
- Financial interdependence
- Intentional community building
- Mobilizing community resources
- Promoting kindness and trust

Values

Much like the overall work of cooperatives, there are certain values to which time bankers are encouraged to adhere:

- **Assets.** We are all assets. We all have something to give.
- **Redefining Work.** Some work is beyond price. Work has to be redefined. To create "the village" that raises healthy children, builds strong families, revitalizes neighborhoods, makes democracy work, advances social justice, and even makes the planet sustainable is valuable work. It needs to be honored, recorded and rewarded.
- **Reciprocity.** Helping works better as a two-way street. The question, "How can I help you?" needs to change so we ask, "How can we help each other build the world we all will live in?"
- **Social Networks.** We need each other. People joined in shared purpose are stronger than individuals. Helping each other, we reweave communities of support, strength

and trust. Community is built upon sinking roots, building trust, creating networks. Special relationships are built on commitment.

- **Respect.** Every human being matters. Respect underlies freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and everything we value. Respect supplies the heart and soul of democracy. When respect is denied to anyone, we all are injured. We must respect where people are in the moment, not where we hope they will be at some future point.

How Exchanges Work

When members log on to our online platform, they're able to submit a "request" for assistance, services or items or "offer" their assistance, services or items. These exchanges are made with time credits earned by fulfilling the request of a member, community partner, or our collective. Everyone's time is equal: One hour = one hour and one hour = one hour time credit to spend or save.

Member-to-Member Exchanges

This is when members exchange time and credits with each other. For example, we have a member who is an artist and was hosting

an art exhibit, but needed help with marketing. She was connected with another member who has graphic design skills, spent a few hours making and revising a flyer for the artist, and collected three hours worth of time credits. Later that month, the member with the graphic design skills who had "banked" three hours then decided to cash in her credits with the artist for help moving into a new apartment, and they were both able to get their needs met.

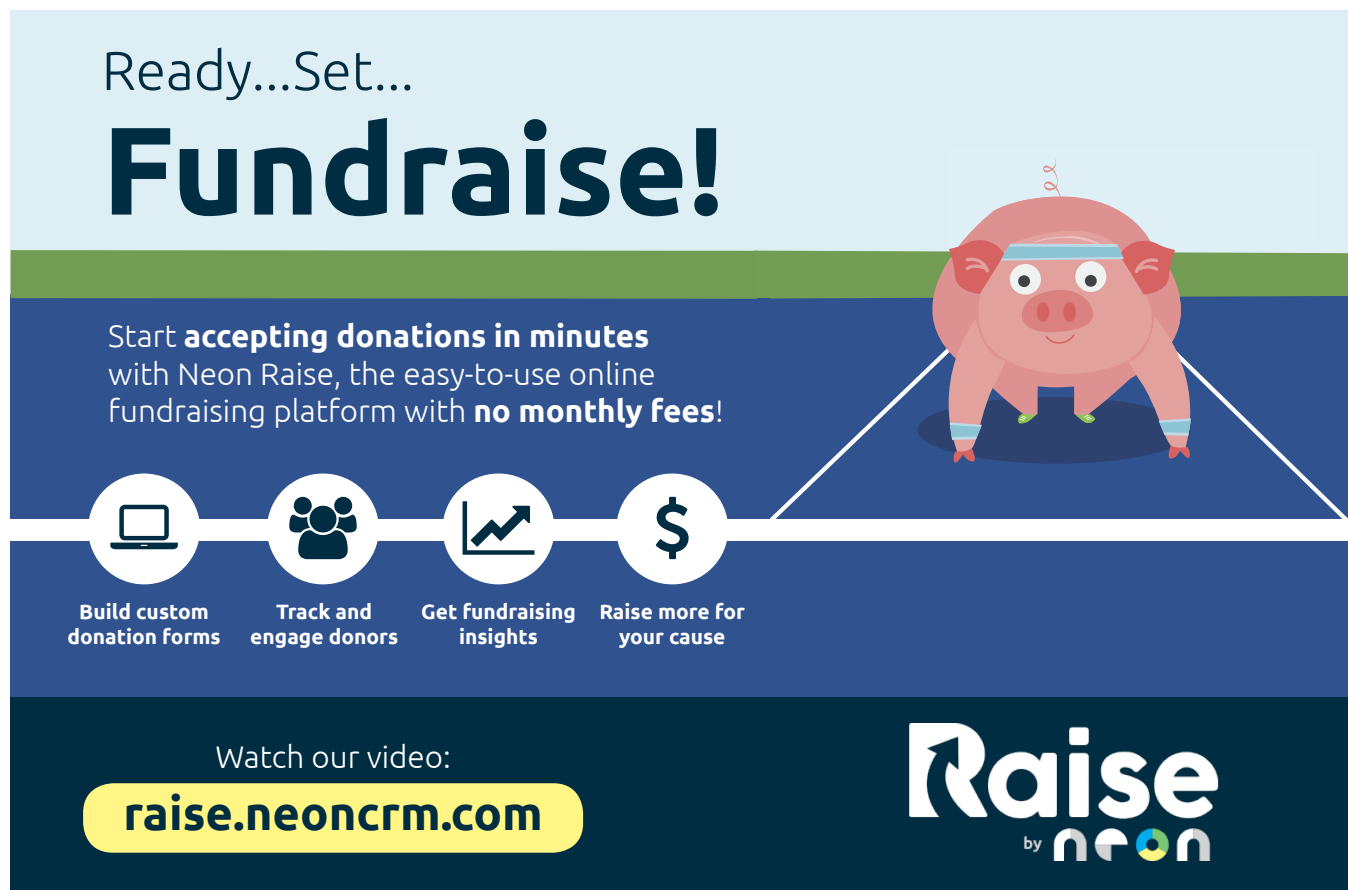
Member-to-Collective Exchanges

This is when members exchange time and credits with WWC or on behalf of WWC. For example, WWC needs someone to help us with grant writing and fundraising. A member does this 10 hours per month for us and receives 10 time credits, new or honed skills for their resume, and a new professional reference.

That member can then use those credits to attend a conference or out-of-state event with us free of charge or simply cash it in for grocery, gas or bus card to stretch their budget.





Collective-to-Community Partner Exchanges

This is when members of the collective exchanges with a community partner. For example, we're currently in an ongoing exchange



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with Philadelphia Area Cooperative Alliance (PACA), in which we assist with communications work (making flyers, social media marketing, writing articles for their blog) in exchange for leadership and organizational development assistance.

We hope to create an effective and innovative economic alternative for folks to transition into, eventually leaving capitalism in the dust and crumbling the entire system, because once its base is gone the whole structure falls apart. In our research, we found several examples of both small-scale and city-wide successful implementation in *The New Wealth of Time: How Time Banking Helps People Build Better Services* report. This groundbreaking report has given us so much of the information we're able to share with you today and inspires us to stay-the-course even when things move slowly.

This past July was *Reciprocity: A Time Banking Project of the Womanist Working Collective's* official launch via our Time Banks USA site and some other support. Since it has only been about six months, we're still in early stages of development with getting all of our 280+ members orientated and transitioned onto our new online platform, which takes time and a lot of patience.

As advised by our local time banking mentors and online support group, we don't expect to see any real results for at least a year in terms of regular and impactful exchanges since folks seem to be most comfortable initiating exchanges in-person. However, we believe the convenience of having the process streamlined and hours tracked online could work for many of our members, especially those with barriers to physical attendance or participation with the larger collective. There are still many kinks to work out, but we have high hopes and dedication to our divesting and dismantling projects.

Here are three things we've learned so far during this process:

1. **Find an online platform that is also mobile-friendly, as this will likely be how most people log their hours.** We started with hOurWorld.org's online platform initially, but preferred the navigability and sleek look of TimeBanks USA's Community Weaver platform. However, if finances are an issue, hOurWorld's completely free site may be better for you.
2. **Figure out how to streamline orientations for your members and coordinators.** After facilitating two nearly three-hour long orientation sessions with fewer than five members in attendance, it was obvious we needed to reevaluate the efficiency of our training process. As a result, we've recently launched a self-serve online orientation on our website, which allows members to move through the materials at their own pace and then

sign-up after they've gotten acquainted with the concept. Additional options we're considering and may work well for you:

- a. Have webinar orientations where you walk through the training materials with your members and record it.
 - b. Have "pop-up style" orientations at different accessible places around the city which may be more convenient for folks; if possible, include daytime/morning session times for folks who work a third shift or are just available earlier.
3. **Dedicate designated time and space to your banking.** Once folks are oriented and begin exchanging, create opportunities for regular in-person interactions. Our general collective events (book club meetings, movie screenings, monthly meetings, etc.) serve as a way to put a face to a name that you may have only seen online. Once that introduction is made and the ice is broken with another member, you're more likely to sign-up for their carpool to the collective's next event.

Conclusion

The very act of participating in this divest and dismantle project is moving towards Black Liberation. Simply by reducing our dependence on this current *imperialist capitalist white supremacist cis/hetero/patriarchal* system we're using "Starve and Stop" organizing tactics. Check back with us in six months for progress updates! ■

LaTierra Piphus is a professional womanist and community organizer specializing in affinity groups for Black Queer and Trans folks and Black Women/Womyn/Womxn and Femmes. A Midwest native, she graduated from the University of Wisconsin with her B.A. in Communication, minor in Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and acquired certificates in Community Based-Learning and Media Literacy.

How You Can Help

Donate by visiting WomanistWorkingCollective.org

Resources

[Book] *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Thought and Practice* by Dr. Jessica Gordon-Nembhard

[Report] *The New Wealth of Time: How Time Banking Helps People Build Better Services* tinyurl.com/NewWealthOfTime

[Manual] *Just Transitions: From Banks And Tanks To Cooperation And Caring* tinyurl.com/EcologicalJusticeByMG