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# Filling in NoVo's void

By Brandi Collins-Calhoun

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## The foundation's decision is the latest example of philanthropy abandoning Black women and girls

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Many of us painfully remember that abrupt moment in May when we received the news that Peter and Jennifer Buffett had eliminated NoVo Foundation's gendered violence program and let go of most of the program's staff.

I was floored by the announcement; more disappointed than surprised really. Establishing a relationship with foundation leaders was going to be key to the work that brought me to work at NCRP.

It wasn't just because they had the largest footprint for gendered violence prevention in the sector (96% to be exact). It wasn't just because they had been prioritizing gendered violence, securing 37% of all the domestic funding for women's rights and services, specifically for Black women.

It was because the staff at NoVo were holding their work in such a

necessary way that it fueled hope that philanthropy could really show up for Black women and girls.

Coming from the frontlines where organizers were often underpaid and underappreciated, it shocked me to know this funding even existed. That NoVo Foundation staff were aware enough of past issues to pay Black women to help lead their strategy.

### IT WASN'T JUST RHETORIC – I SAW IT WITH MY VERY OWN EYES.

In my first few weeks at NCRP my colleagues urged me to register for a conference that was around the corner, the Grantmakers for Girls of Color Conference (G4GC). Still new to the role, nothing my colleagues could have said would have prepared me for what I was getting into.

I arrived, understandably nervous, in New Orleans, a city I had never been in, with a network of people I have never met.

Yet, stepping into the hotel ballroom full of folks of color felt like walking into the warmest group hug. Familiar faces from the frontlines let me know I was in good company without a single touch, but the true affirmation came when the panels began.

I sat in awe when Tynesha McHarris, who was then still a program officer at NoVo, grounded us in quotes from poet and activist Nikki Giovanni:



Peter and Jennifer Buffett

“Life is only about the I-tried-to-do. I don’t mind the failure, but I can’t imagine that I’d forgive myself if I didn’t try.”

“Mistakes are a fact of life. It is the response to the error that counts.”

The quotes at once affirmed the decision to come to New Orleans and the work that lay ahead of me within the sector. Prior to that, between imposter syndrome and premediated defeat, I wasn’t quite sure how I would settle into my role at NCRP.

Yes, I was excited about bringing an activist mentality to the work needed to ensure equitable funding of our movements and communities.

Yet there was also a deep reservoir of hesitation, as I wondered whether I could safely insert my whole self -- Black, queer, woman -- in the often perceived as respectable, but still overwhelmingly systematically racist, sector known as philanthropy.

McHarris continued her talk by uplifting the committed work her colleagues were doing. But before passing the mic, she named the reality that NoVo and their partners were mindful of when creating the space we were in.

They curated that space with the understanding that they could not commit themselves to this work without creating a safe space for ourselves, and that G4GC was a commitment to provide a safe space for us to do this work and space to practice liberation safely and unpack all we hold in this work.

As silly as it may sound, those first 5 minutes of the panel was all the affirmation that I needed to feel safe in this work.

I found so much solace in those words and held on to them when I left the conference. They carried me over the next few months, anytime my imposter syndrome decided to attend a Zoom call or my anxieties around philanthropy got too heavy, I would go back to that moment and feel just a bit lighter.

To see that this kind of money was going towards the welfare and -- dare I say -- the survival of Black women and girls continued to be a liberating moment in the weeks that followed.

I immediately began thinking about the programs and resources I needed as a Black girl and later a Black woman. What if the spaces that were supposed to keep me safe had access to these kinds of funds and support? What could this kind of funding mean for my daughter and her future?

NoVo was supposed to be the face of a sector that was beginning to listen and learn from the painful lessons of the past. For more than decade, they had invested in a host of projects for women and girls that worked on replacing systems of exploitation and domination with local partnerships centered on the most impacted communities.

Their Initiative to Empower Adolescent Girls emphasized building the capacity of girls to reach their full potential and shifting social and cultural norms so that girls are valued, while efforts like their Initiative to End Violence Against Girls and Women sought to achieve long-term policy and cultural change, while building the leadership of the most impacted communities.

They believed that by supporting not just the goals of movements, but also their leaders, we could achieve a more equitable and just change in the world.

That is why NCRP gave them an Impact Award in 2013. As we wrote back then, “the foundation understands that solving the most intractable problems in the world requires mass mobilization.”

That was before Peter and Jennifer Buffett chose to prioritize their white wealth over my Black body.

### DOES PHILANTHROPY EVEN VALUE MY LIFE?

That day in May was another personal and professional reminder that way too often, my safety is a one-dimensional, optional effort for philanthropy.

The murder of freedom fighter Oluwatoyin Salau and the back-to-back homicides of trans women Dominique Fells and Riah Milton. The illegal raid that killed Breonna Taylor. The unconscionable hysterectomies of detained immigrant women in Georgia. The disproportionate percentage of the economy’s essential jobs held by women that puts them in danger of contracting and dying from COVID-19. Not a day goes by where women, femmes and girls -- especially Black ones -- are in the crosshairs of harm by men and systems of power.

Even without a pandemic or all the events of the past year, the Buffets’ announcement made little sense. Their selfish actions unceremoniously terminated not just the work of intelligent and innovative Black women, but also set back the work of those who were actively trying to renew the faith of those impacted by a funding pattern that until recently seemed more interested in harming us rather than keeping us safe.

A longstanding funding pattern that fuels a lack of trust that many Black institutions and women have for philanthropy to this day.

While the traumatic residue that philanthropy’s past broken promises has left on the movement can’t be worsened or even improved by one action of one funder, the forced exit of NoVo out of the reproductive access and gendered violence movement is still significant.

When will funders make the necessary long-term investments that will stop the erasure of our trans kindred? When will Black bodies stop being just data points and Black narratives become enough?

Understandably, NoVo’s own grantees have been hesitant to talk publicly about the situation, fearful of being perceived as being willing to bite the funder who helps keep the doors open and the bills paid. (Disclosure: NCRP is a NoVo Foundation grantee.)

Still, those who did speak to me were not nearly as surprised as some of the rest of us. While they all named having a

positive experience with the NoVo Foundation staff, they had inherited too much trauma from other philanthropic interactions and foundations to think that these positive experiences could last long.

Similar to grantees, waking up and finding out that all this amazing work would be discontinued was such a familiar feeling. I wish I could say it was the first time white greed stole my joy, but I would be lying if I did.

### HOW THE WORK GOES ON

Current NoVo grantees await the Buffetts' commitment to a responsible exit accompanied by an explicit strategy to tie-off the existing grants. Their silence continues to add weight to the uncertainty of funding for the vital work current grantees are holding.

So, what can those gatekeeping power and white wealth do in this moment to make the weight Black women hold in this moment a little lighter? While some foundations have offered heartfelt excuses and virally insightful Black Lives Matter posts, my hope for the future is rooted in the Black women and femmes that continue working at repairing the cracks that white wealth has created.

There is a need for new funders to commit approximately \$95 million dollars towards combating gendered violence in order to fill the gap in funding the Buffetts have created. However, we know that there's more funding and action needed to invest in the safety of Black women and girls.

To start, don't just follow their lead. Fund their vision.

Efforts like the Black Girl Freedom Fund, which is challenging the sector to invest \$1 billion dollars over the next 10 years explicitly in the safety and survival of Black women and femmes.

Co-founders like G4GC's Monique W. Morris and Girls for Gender Equity's Joanne N. Smith and outside supporters like McHarris remind us all that we still have champions that will not shirk from their moral responsibility to serve

current and future generations.

That "all social justice efforts benefit when we place value in Black girls' and women's lives and leadership."

They do so not because philanthropy has earned it, but because human dignity and rights demands it. That we all deserve to live in spaces where we are free from harm and free to be safe.

On my worst days, the thing that keeps me going is knowing that I get to wake up the next day and be a Black woman.

Sure, that may sound to some people as super vain and radical. However, it's that mindset that keeps me and so many others who do this work most grounded.

When every system is rooted in harming me and the movements that claim to fight for my Black life erase me, what choice is there but to find the beauty in my existence?

My survival, my safety and how people like me unapologetically take up space, are all true acts of resistance in the

shadows of the people and systems that root for or actively enable our demise.

The truth is that this past year – and those that follow – may continue to leave *me* struggling to find a sense of safety in the sector, on the frontlines or even in my own neighborhood.

Yet, because of the work of so many of my colleagues, I hold fast to the promise that I made to myself when I first became an organizer. It's that I would not just make my well-being and protection my highest priority. It's that I would also expect it be everyone else's.

Honestly, how do you seek to achieve Black liberation without investing and prioritizing the safety of Black women and girls? How can any of us be free, if one of us isn't?

Peter and Jennifer, we are still waiting for an answer. ■

*Brandi Collins-Calhoun is NCRP's senior movement engagement associate.*



The National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy congratulates the NoVo Foundation on being nominated for a 2013 NCRP IMPACT Award.

**NoVo Foundation**  
create. change.



*In 2013, NoVo Foundation received one of the inaugural NCRP Impact Awards for being an "exemplary grantmaker and leader among the country's large private foundations," largely due to its funding for Black women and girls.*