

An Open Letter to the  
Union of Concerned  
Scientists: On Black  
Death, Black Silencing,  
and Black Fugitivity

An Affirmation of Black Life

From a Concerned Black Human

“All that you touch, you Change  
All that you Change, Changes you  
The only lasting truth is Change  
God is Change”

**Octavia Butler, Parable of the Sower**

“If you are silent about your pain, they will kill you and say you enjoyed it.”

**Zora Neale Hurston**

“The mandate for Black people in this time is to avenge the suffering of our ancestors, to earn the respect of future generations, and to be willing to be transformed in the service of the work.”

**Mary Hooks**

“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed, but when we are silent we are still afraid. So it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive” -

[Audre Lorde](#)

## **Black Life Matters.**

It may seem irresponsible and careless of me to leave so suddenly. But there is always more to the story, more truth to unfold. This decision wasn't sudden at all. I hope that by telling my story, I encourage you all to dig a little deeper in all areas of your life to illuminate more truth instead of the narrow perceptions we tend to hold. That we be willing and able to understand and hold each other's truths with patience and compassion. The truth is that while I've been able to connect with many wonderful people, and learn so much, it was really stressful and traumatic for me working here and I hope no other Black people ever have to share this pain.

As news and images of Black death surround us in the media and bring sorrow to our minds and hearts, this is my contribution to the "open discussion on recent tragedies." The recent events are alarming, yes, but the truth is we have been dying all along. Since before Ferguson, before the video recordings, before "police" existed. Since the violent theft of this land, Black people were designated sacrificial chattel. We have been lynched, beat, silenced, and demeaned for centuries. The riots are justified. This email is my version of a riot. Of refusing to accept the silencing of my own slow death. Not disconnected from those in the streets of Minneapolis, nor Ferguson, nor anywhere across the country or globe where Black life has been stolen, degraded, abused, or sucked dry.

But this is not a story about Black death. It is one of reclamation, liberation, and resurrection. Black rebirth. Black awakening. Black [fugitivity](#). Black healing. Remember these thoughts and images. Give them power, too. Instead of only mourning, [celebrate me](#), and all Black people around you who have survived and who continue surviving. Ask us what we need to be able to breathe easier. [I can breathe](#), and I will breathe. I will release all things that make it difficult for me to breathe. I will create all the space I need to take all the time to breathe as slowly as I want, affirming and appreciating every cell, molecule, and universal power that makes each breath possible for me. And with each breath I commit to using my voice in ways that affirm the life of others.

We should always grieve, and mourn all things lost, all lives lost in this war. As well as make the necessary shifts to support life. That is not limited to scheduling an hour for a "rapid response" style discussion on the happenings, to sharing the pornographic, traumatic, violent images that stain our collective conscience, nor to educating yourselves on how this could have happened. Sometimes to affirm Black life, the best thing you can do is pay attention to the Black people around you. Affirm their life. Don't limit your thoughts of Blackness to the tragic, woeful limited views of those that get mass attention. Sometimes Black death is slower, less visible. Less intentional.

## **Black Stories should be listened to.**

The story of my time at UCS is not particularly unique or juicy, but it is my own. I don't intend to characterize the experience of all Black people in the organization, but I also include the stories of some fallen (or maybe risen?) comrades in this struggle. There are no villains, no victims, just truths that I don't want stored away in a confidential exit interview. This is the institutional knowledge I am consenting to pass on. I will tell my truth through my voice because I finally trust that it's worth telling. It may not be communicated in the way that science (read: whiteness) tends to value information, but I hope you read with an open heart, as I am writing from my own. I'll start from the beginning.

First, I'll say I've never believed in jobs. I believe in individuals showing up for their communities in the ways that they know how and are able to. In the ways that excite them, not how they are told. Jobs, and especially [non-profit](#) jobs, extract and rarely [regenerate](#) human energy. They suck you dry, leeching on passion and desire for change with very little actual impact. Yet, we are told that we need them to survive. That the stolen land that holds us all so generously and freely, who produces fruit and oxygen and stability even when the nourishment is not reciprocated, must be parceled up and sold off for anyone with the right price. That those willing to invest genuine care and live in right relationship with the land are not able to afford it without bloodying their hands with sin and self-denial in exchange for dollars. As if our words, our work, creation, our hands, are not enough to care for each other. And with these realities dominant, since 2015, I have been seeking "jobs" that align with my values of environmental, racial, and food justice in order to live on a planet held hostage by the greedy.

Before UCS, I was working as a school garden/culinary teacher through FoodCorps (criminally underpaid by an AmeriCorps stipend), working at a tea shop, and a mushroom farm and barely able to meet the cost of living in DC. My intention in all of these roles was for Black people, like, me to have access to healing through food. I wanted to teach young Black kids about the wonders of growing food that I didn't learn until I went to college. I wanted to learn about the magic of herbalism and I wanted to be in community with folks. But I was exhausted all the time and needed to figure out what was next to avoid burn out.

I loved working with the kids and was affirmed by seeing them shift their attitudes towards trying new and exciting foods and activities. But I felt very limited because I knew that no matter how much I taught them to enjoy eating vegetables, if their parents couldn't afford buying them or didn't have the time and space to grow them, or had difficulty getting to the grocery store that never had fresh produce (all of which were true for the Black community I was working in in Congress Heights), then the knowledge would remain limited to their time at school. I felt stuck. I wanted to do more. And I knew at the rate I was going, working so much without a sustainable income to show for it, I had to do it very differently. I learned about the local DC policy

initiatives to increase healthy, affordable food access through my dear friend Asha's work at DC Greens. I was fascinated by the possibility of the government actually supporting such efforts. I had only ever believed the state to cause harm to people like me. That sparked my interest in the potential of policy to shift systems and increase people's ability to care for themselves.

Then a divine nudge from the universe came to me in the form of a job description my friend sent to me, suggesting I apply. It seemed perfect. The organization, the Union of Concerned Scientists, was committed to racial equity, environmental justice, and uplifting community voices in the federal policymaking process. The role involved coordinating a national coalition of grassroots partners who were committed to food systems transformation. It had an actual livable salary (more money than I or anyone in my family had ever made) with benefits. It seemed too perfect. The program I was in encouraged us to apply to jobs, even if only to get the experience of putting ourselves out there and doing the interview process. So I decided to go for it. I was torn between putting myself through another year of AmeriCorps or finding something else, and I decided I would leave it up to chance. I would apply to this single job, and if it was meant for me, I would get it, and if not I would do another year of FoodCorps. So I wrote my cover letter with all my interest and experience. I freshened my resume and sent it in, mostly to say I did it, but doubtful that I would actually get an interview. But to my surprise, I did! And that sparked a glimmer of hope that maybe I was in fact qualified and deserving. Whatever gaps in knowledge were there, I could learn quickly.

The interview process was rigid and cold. I received robotic emails with bullet lists of next steps, instructions for recording my video interview on my own by a specific deadline. In the video interview, I was given a few seconds to read and gather my thoughts to specific questions revealed seconds before. I just let my answers flow, as I do with most things. After recording, I felt horrible. I thought there was no way they would take me seriously. To my surprise again, I was invited to an in person interview. I put on the singular "professional" outfit I owned at the time and showed up to the lifeless downtown office buildings ten minutes early and walked in with a smile on my face, ready to sell myself.

When we walked to the conference room, there were five people in the room sitting around tables who all stood up to shake my hand, hand me cards, and then get to business. They took turns asking me questions about my experience and interest. They all seemed very serious, busy, performatively friendly, maybe even a little eager and excited. Other people might have been intimidated. It was all very exciting and new for me, a place I had never imagined myself being. I walked away proud of myself for trying, trusting that if it were meant for me that I would get it. A few weeks later, I got a call from the Deputy Director that I was being offered the job! I negotiated a start date that would allow me to finish my previous commitment to [FoodCorps](#) and rest easy knowing I had something exciting and stable waiting for me.

## **Black Minds are valuable.**

On my first day, I was overjoyed at the newness. I wanted to talk to everyone and hear their stories and passions and how I could support the work. People were friendly, excited to have me there. They set up one on ones to get to know me and explain their role on the team. Then they returned to their business and I sat in my little cubicle staring at the screen all day. I was sent several folders and links of documents to read up on for onboarding. I did several orientations to understand UCS' history, structure, and process. I was also given some background on the Good Food For All (GFFA) coalition, where I was told the majority of my time would be invested. Talking to people was always better than reading the monotonous documents of information that my brain never really seemed to fully integrate. I read, and reread all the documents but always had more questions than answers. When I asked team members, it became clear that the answers didn't really exist. "So, what's the next step? What's the goal?" I was given very limited direction but just trusted that it would all make sense in time. I wasn't aware that there had been no groundwork or sustainable infrastructure for me to operate on.

Through it all, I was given minimal support or direction. I was tasked with planning a conference scheduled 3 months after my start date. I focused my energy on that, dealing with logistics, planning agendas without any clear sense of how to do that and create federal policy priorities while being so new to the role. I doubted I could do it all, but refused to give up. I introduced myself to the GFFA members across the country to hear their stories, build relationships and understand what I/UCS/GFFA could do to support them. Each conversation was great and was a refreshing break from the emptiness of the office. But I wasn't able to tie the very diverse needs and interests of the members into a unified plan or set of goals. It seemed like they all were there with their own separate intentions, or were forced to be there by the funder and didn't really have the time to put into thinking about collective goals. Eventually, I got the agenda done, planned a successful (by the members' and teams' standards) convening. I was proud of myself.

But I noticed how at the convening, although the intention was to uplift voices from "marginalized communities," the majority of people participating were white. They were working "for" communities of color in some capacity, but not actually representing them. I decided to do more outreach to get better representation of the voices we wanted to center. It was exhausting because I was doing all of this while also being asked to proofread reports, join extra meetings for UCS and be the voice of Blackness in every room. I was put on every racial equity task force that popped up (which never seemed to produce any actual changes). Instead of building relationships with people and communities, the team depended on me and my perspective to help them make all decisions around equity. I was put into the role of at least 3 different jobs with barely enough market rate compensation for one. I was a program coordinator, coalition director, equity consultant, and who knows what else. My supervisor and I

agreed to a “hands off” approach because she had a ton of other work to focus on and I didn’t want to be micromanaged. But I ended up feeling that way anyway.

Most emails I sent to the coalition needed to be approved by her. She would strikethrough pretty much everything I wrote, commenting and changing everything to the point where it ended up being her writing instead of my own. She said the font I used wasn’t standard, was “too much.” Telling me that I’m wrong, my way is wrong, her way is the right way, but in much less words. I remember worrying about whether my emails had too many exclamation marks (too much joy) in them to be “professional” enough. She “suggested” for me to send a newsletter every week. To not leave the office on Fridays until I had sent it. No matter how tired I was, what else I had going on in my life, or what else needed to be done. I felt controlled. I was drowning and didn’t feel like I had the support that I needed. I understood that these behaviors (language policing) and suggestions (overworking, quantity over quality) were not personality traits, but manifestations of the [white dominant culture](#) throughout the organization. That there was a hierarchical decision-making structure in place to protect the brand, procedures, and culture. GFFA, the equity work, felt like a separate part of the organization that I was leading alone. That everyone else was continuing with the “real” work, while I pushed on trying to learn, do, and be everything everyone was expecting me to be. As if anti-racist work is something that could just be sprinkled on top. As if my assimilation and conformity would serve any transformative purpose.

The coalition I was charged with “coordinating” had no decision-making structure, no membership agreements, no shared priorities beyond a mission statement created years before my arrival. I dived into this work, excited to create something, ignoring the fact that I was a single being. I had been part of many local coalitions, but organizing nationally was very new and difficult. I didn’t let that stop me. I joined other national/regional coalitions to build power, but also to learn how they operated and bring those tools to GFFA. I learned about consent-based decision making, about various priority setting processes through online surveys. I tried everything in the coalition but none of it seemed to land. There was lots of energy initially but it all faded away. I was handed grant agreements clearly created by non-members of the coalition so I tried to create space for more member leadership and direction so UCS wouldn’t take up too much space. I was charged with managing and evaluating the large grant (initially with the help of an evaluator and my supervisor, but then on my own) with no grant experience. I was told that the foundation wanted a certain aesthetic for its work to be held in so we had to prioritize spending money on a nice venue for meetings instead of supporting travel and lodging for the voices we supposedly wanted so badly to center. I tried to play along. I tried to believe that our work centered people, not institutions. That we were accountable to more than just funders.

## **Black Culture should be respected.**

Eventually I learned the [culture](#) of the team through observation, which mirrored the world outside the org. There were people I would never get to see or talk to who handed down instructions. The men made the decisions, were affirmed and celebrated for doing their jobs. The women did most of the work. The BIPOC were ignored, tokenized, silenced, exploited and largely in temporary positions. The [microaggressions](#) felt more like [dodging the devil](#) than the mosquito bites described in our racial equity training. I saw how white men scrolled through their phones or laptops as I talked, and got up and left whenever they wanted to be done meeting with me. The only time I got feedback was anonymously during annual reviews. I disliked the team's inability/unwillingness to just communicate openly, honestly, and compassionately with each other. People [ate in front of their computers](#). People in other offices sent me aggressive emails reminding me to submit expense reports and timesheets before asking me how I was doing, how my heart was, or if I felt alive today.

I resented the office culture. Feeling like I was being surveilled in a sterile, factory-like environment. I asked my supervisor if I could work from home because my role was intended to work primarily with partners who were never in the office. I was told I couldn't work from home because "it was against company policy" (which wasn't actually written anywhere in the personnel policy at the time). Or because I wasn't senior enough... hadn't been there long enough... hadn't proven myself... because if I did it, everyone else would do it. This resistance to change from a supposedly science-based organization ignoring the scientifically proven benefits of workers being [more productive](#) when able to choose when and how they work was an act of paternalism and power hoarding. I saw how in making hiring decisions, staff questioned whether candidates would be able to "adjust" to the office culture, instead of whether UCS should do some adjusting to be more inclusive.

I tried to bring the storytelling, song, and laughter that my ancestors gifted me with to the office. I tried to disrupt our robotic weekly team meetings with check in questions that helped us get to know each other on a personal level and build trust, bring excitement, fun. But I eventually stopped. My voice got tired. I tried to share poems. I tried to bring life. I tried to bring spirit. But it almost always just felt like death. I was drowned in the loneliness of my sterile, box office. I sent [long emails](#) about my feelings, just hoping to connect, throwing a line to be pulled up from the water. No replies. Not urgent enough. The funders didn't ask for you to talk about your feelings.

I tried to spend as much time as I could away from the office. Going to every conference that came up. To learn about how I could do the job(s) better since no one around me was able to teach/support me. But also just wanting to connect with people. That was the only time things felt real. Filled with spirit and lead by (BIPOC) people driven by genuine transformation and committed to the work beyond their jobs. In the office we talked about people as if they were



only numbers contributing to our action alerts whose goals were created in our white conference rooms from white minds and white values.

I felt the stress, tension, and/or apathy in our meetings and wanted to take collective breaths, but felt like there was no space or time to just be together as humans. I wondered if people needed hugs. I knew so few of the acronyms that were thrown around and barely anything about federal policy or how UCS operated. No one asked my thoughts unless it was in regards to the “racial equity component.” I didn’t feel like I was a part of the team or needed to be in all the meetings that were just thrown on my calendar all the time. I spoke up at first but eventually I stopped asking questions. I tried to research on my own. When I wasn’t succeeding at my impossible workload, I assumed I wasn’t smart enough or disciplined enough. I thought I was [lazy](#) and irresponsible like my professors told me in college because I failed to prove myself by using citation formats that truly never mattered by any non-white standard.

I thought [I was the flawed one](#). I told myself I would “fake it til I make it” until the end of the year. I planned another GFFA convening in March 2018 and that provided more excitement. After the convenings felt like the only time I received feedback, affirmation, and connection. The only time I was respected and valued for my efforts. So I lived for those little moments and kept telling myself I would stay until the next convening. Because everyone was counting on me to. I also felt like I had to sacrifice myself if I were truly loyal to my community, to Black people, to myself, to everyone that had trusted me to just get the work done.

I saw how in acknowledgement of social conditions influencing our work, the leadership team repeatedly referenced the youth climate movement, the women’s movement, science rising, and others by name but refused to acknowledge Black Lives Matter. I felt so unseen. I felt so unappreciated. I had given the majority of my waking hours to this organization and they refused to acknowledge that my life mattered. I mentioned this to the deputy director in one of our planning meetings and she jotted down a note and kept on with the meeting.

So I tried to negotiate, bargain with myself, because everyone kept telling me they needed me to stay. I tried bringing my partner to work with me (who was working remotely at the time) to make it more bearable. But she endured a racist accusation from the former (white) DC office assistant, who told my supervisor my partner was stealing office supplies and printing things in large quantities. I have no idea where that accusation came from because she had never taken anything and never (couldn’t have) connected her laptop to any of the office printers. She was lied on, and my supervisor mentioned it to me with this knowledge. Instead of asking the office assistant to be less racist, she asked me to be “more careful” and make sure I sign all visitors in each day. Which is office policy, sure, but also white policy. My partner was appalled, understanding the actions to be anti-Black and violent. I didn’t feel comfortable coming back either, but I had to. And it made it even more painful.

## **Black Healing is necessary.**

There were times where I needed to mourn. Just to grieve and feel through my pain and not have to focus on work. When Black death and white violence screamed itself visible through every screen across the country. When loved ones were lost or I experienced my own personal heartbreak. There were times where I wanted to learn about what was going on around me, since UCS' work was always so far removed from actual people and their needs. I wanted to know how I could show up and support my community and requested time off and schedule adjustments. I told my supervisor my vision of a [world where we all had space to heal and grow](#). I was told I couldn't use my sick days to process and support my mental health. That I needed to use my vacation time if I wanted days off. I didn't want to sacrifice my vacations, which I used to volunteer for other organizations. So I just kept chugging along, broken, bleeding invisibly.

I felt like a tender plant constantly being uprooted and under distressed conditions, withering away. But no one around me asked what I needed to thrive. They didn't notice the lack of sunlight or water, or attention/intention. They just noticed that I wasn't producing fruit. That I didn't respond to their email or submit my report or timesheet. That I was late or didn't show up today. I blamed myself for the unfertile conditions. I thought I was ungrateful because no one else seemed to be complaining. And because I was getting paid the most I had in my life. More than anyone in my family. I told myself that they needed me to stay. Because my parents came here for better opportunities like stability and benefits that weren't available in Jamaica's economy. Because I was able to support my family with their bills. Because my mom had been evicted from our family home years before and maybe if I stayed longer I could buy us a new house.

Then I got overwhelmed by all the emails and all the work. I didn't know how to translate all the next steps from the convening into a plan. I didn't know how to align the very real needs of the people and the very empty policies we advocated for. I didn't have the materials to bridge the Congressional conversations on whether or not we should feed people (funding SNAP) and the vision I had for an equitable future. All by myself. I asked who I knew to for support in figuring out next steps, action to take. I tried engaging GFFA members more so they could support some of the labor and help me think things through. But it turned out to be me coordinating several working groups with members rarely showing up or taking leadership (due to their own limited capacities). I was exhausted. I felt like I couldn't ask for the help I needed from anyone. Everyone seemed so urgently concerned about everything else.

I tried to resign when I noticed this pattern. I told my first supervisor and she convinced me to stay. I cried and told her I felt like I was dying every day when I came to work. Like I was a wild horse being whipped into domestication and needed to leave. She told me UCS wasn't that bad. That she had worked places so much worse. Everywhere else had less funding, was less organized, had more work. I told her it wasn't about the organization, it was about what I

wanted with my life. But she said UCS needed me. That I should stay for 2 more years. There was always something that needed to be done. So I decided to stay a bit longer.

I allowed my compassion and loyalty to be used as weapons against me and my guilt and love for others to overpower my love for myself. I allowed myself to be disconnected from the earth, from the people around me, and from my own heart. I allowed myself to be held hostage. And how dare I, when my people are dying every day, consent to my life being taken? How dare I refuse to use my voice no matter how small I think it may be? How dare I silence my ancestors who speak through my voice? Who laugh through my lungs? How dare I stifle their joy with compromise? And how dare you try to convince me to?

## **Where are all the Black people?**

I was excited to meet the 200+ staff in the org across the country at our all staff retreat. We were pre-selected to participate in diverse pods of staff from varying programs, positions, and length of time in the organization. In these pods, we answered discussion questions to help us get to know each other. One of which was something along the lines of “how did you end up at UCS?” I was excited to talk about my commitment to Black life and wellbeing, my belief in and work towards a better world, and learning about how to do that through policy. I was disillusioned by other staff, many of whom had been in the organization for 5+ years, talked about looking for something new to do, or being forwarded UCS job descriptions and thinking they sounded cool. There was little to no passion. The passion that was there was more for the planet than for people, and certainly not Black people. At dinner, when asked what shifts the folks who had been there longer noticed in the organization over the years, one person replied that they had done “a really good job with the language in the job descriptions” and therefore had an influx of POC staff over the past couple years. This revelation confirmed my suspicion that the organization set the intention of DEI to shift with the trends but didn’t actually do the work. Hired the POC, and expected them to do it. They simply baited us in with the language of equity without making significant infrastructural, cultural, and procedural changes to prioritize and accommodate the POC people nor the actual work of racial equity. As if [anti-racist](#) work were something you could just sprinkle on top.

The retreat centered racial equity strategy discussions, but they all seemed so sloppily inefficient. As if the few hours they scheduled to talk to each other would operationalize the work that needed to be done. But I understood this to be the beginning of their work and leaned into grace and patience. I believed that this was an exciting time for the organization and wanted to support with the transition. But talking to people really brought up doubt. During our private dance party at a hotel in Cape Cod, our keynote speaker, [Xiuhtezcatl Martinez](#), came onto the dance floor with a friend. They were both wearing hoodies and seemed a little nervous. They weren’t familiar to me so my instinct was to introduce myself and ask how their night was going, their role at the org. I recognized them from other spaces and was so excited to learn about their

fantastic EJ work and we danced for a bit and moved on. Later, I overheard a few white women who spotted them saying they should call security because there were intruders there. I was glad I overheard because I was able to explain that they were the keynotes. They wouldn't believe me and insisted they were a danger. They said "no way!" and laughed at me. I brought them over and asked them to introduce themselves and the white anxiety barely settled. Had I not been there, who knows what could have happened. That was racist. But I ignored it, understanding it to be a couple individuals, not a belief/practice representing the whole organization. I hoped.

## **Black women deserve respect.**

I saw what happened to all of the other women of color on the team, pushed out of the organization. Jackie, our legislative associate said she was overworked, bullied, surveilled, gaslighted, reprimanded. Told she was lazy and didn't want to be there. She spoke with HR about the support and accommodation she needed based on some health issues she was facing and they told her she just wasn't working hard enough. They gave her a warning and eventually fired her. Kranti, the other women of color, never told me why she left. But I heard from others, and believe, that she was pushed out with similar tactics. Her supervisor yelled at her and told her she wasn't doing enough despite her hard work and 7 year commitment to the organization. Her departure was sudden and secretive. Rochelle, another black woman, was our outreach assistant and did not have the managerial support she needed. She brought it up several times but no one helped. She was disposed of at the first opportunity. We were told it was because of budget cuts for the fiscal year and that her position was temporary. Yet, they put out a hiring call for the outreach coordinator position (which Rochelle was qualified for) and never encouraged her to apply. At the same time, one of the other temporary positions occupied by a white staff member was made permanent. It was clear who was more valued. Either options would have worked for Rochelle. I heard about how Asha, Tiffany, and Vivian were also neglected/disinvested in and pushed out of CSD, and so many more stories that go untold. I saw how all of the Black people, young people, and POC were leaving all around me. This is a strong trend of WOC being pushed out by our team.

Meanwhile, everyone seemed to love me. People affirmed me and told me they wanted me around. Told me to just [hold on](#). Put me on pedestals I could not claim. Asked me to speak at events and put on shows. I couldn't tell if they were actually content with my performance or if they were concerned with the optics of throwing me away, since I was more externally facing and was changing the perception people had of the organization. That I was the bait for their transactional relationship with "grassroots partners" and "marginalized" communities with my charismatic personality and community connections. Throughout all these complex thoughts, I convinced myself that I was well. I performed wellness and told people that when they asked, except the few folks I felt like I could trust to actually hold my truth. The others tried to convince me that my struggle wasn't real or just never even pretended to care what I was going through. Like my doctors who avoided diagnosis by ignoring my symptoms, as [they do with most Black women](#). I told colleagues I gained 30 pounds from the stress and lack of time to care for myself,

and they said “Oh, I couldn’t tell, you look great!” I was told there was nothing wrong. If I believed them, I wouldn’t have known until it was too late.

The resentment built up. Emails piled up by the hundreds. I forgot to follow up with next steps after meetings. I procrastinated, maybe subconsciously hoping they would fire me since they wouldn’t let me quit. I knew it could happen to me at any moment. I called in sick. Sometimes I didn’t call in sick but just didn’t show up. I didn’t go to the POC/Powering Our Communities meetings because I didn’t want to get too comfortable. I didn’t want to bond with more people and feel like I should stay when I knew I needed to leave. Although, I wish I was able to be there for them. To let them know how I was [getting through](#) and hear their own struggles and survival strategies.

I had to fight for it, but eventually I got an arrangement to work from home twice a week. This would allow me to have a dedicated schedule with focused coalition and learning time. But even then I was still miserable, in any arrangement. I still couldn’t get out of bed every day because I had nothing to look forward to. I was so unfulfilled and in a constant state of stress. I overslept and tried to rest the pain away. I didn’t want to be awake because I felt dead inside. I tried to create a routine of [listening to podcasts](#) every morning, I tried exercising, I tried everything but was always a walking ghost. Because I was ignoring my truth and my longing for something more meaningful. Longing for a reality where I could express myself and live authentically.

## **Space is Black.**

When I finally decided to leave, in March 2020, I planned to stay on to onboard my replacement. I wanted to wait until after the next GFFA convening in July. I tried to stretch myself as far as I could. Be as “responsible” as I could. I believe in always leaving things better than I found them. So I told my supervisor, and told the managing director, but confidently and firmly that I was leaving and wanted to plan the transition with them. They were disappointed, but I would not allow myself to be convinced this time. This time, when they asked if there was anything they could do to keep me, I said the decision was final. The September date I proposed would have allowed me to transfer the institutional knowledge and set up a successful transition, while also saving up for some unemployment time and thinking about what’s next for me. I had no idea what was next, I just knew I needed to leave. I still don’t. I just know I don’t ever want to feel like I did here again. I don’t ever want to feel as trapped, exploited, and uncared for as I did here.

So I’ve been holding on, but slipping away, even more ghostly than before. I was almost relieved when the COVID crisis forced us to work from home because I could finally have space to take care of myself in the mornings and evenings. I could finally work with music in the background and in the company of people (roommates) who actually cared about me. But there was also a global tragedy taking place. A time that felt so clearly like space for us to be with our families, to care for our bodies, to rest and restore, to reflect and release. To show up for our communities

and care for each other. To catch up with loved ones we never have time to chat with. To go at a different pace and reprioritize how we spend our time. I was shocked at how quickly UCS adapted to the “new normal” with what seemed like more emails than ever piling up. More blogs, more press releases, more urgency and work everywhere.

It’s great that UCS was so flexible, and able to share information to audiences so quickly. But, it was also all so overwhelming while trying to grasp everything taking place in the world. To manage my own mental health while keeping up with everything going on. It all seemed so [sick](#). I fell even more behind on work because I would stare at the screen for hours without being able to retain any of the information because my mind was always somewhere else. I was barely present for our video meetings, even if I was the one talking. I couldn’t understand how everyone else seemed to be thriving, continuing with business as usual. People all over the world were dying, and I too felt like I was dying. A different kind of death. I asked my supervisor for time off during several of our check ins. She told me to look for a time after annual planning was over when I could some vacation days.

I tried to wait and work, but this time my body rebelled. My fingers would not type, my eyes watered, my back hurt, my mind raced or went blank. And under all this pressure, I cracked open. It took a Black woman in the organization to finally tell me what I needed to hear. That I shouldn’t kill myself over a job. I finally acknowledged my exhaustion with whiteness, with white institutions, with being the only one in the room to have to really think about it. To really feel it. I don’t want to be a microphone. I just want to live. I finally realized that everything everyone had been telling me about them needing me, all the things I had been telling myself about being stuck and not having any other path, were all lies. They were other people’s truths, not my own. They are too heavy to carry. They will kill me. I am choosing to tap in and release all limits on what is possible for me. I am choosing expansion.

## **Black Joy is possible.**

If there’s anything I’ve learned from this COVID crisis and the neverending trauma of 2020, it’s that there is always opportunity. Opportunity to shift and to grow. To reshape our futures. Every death is a calling to be reborn. To rethink the way we see ourselves and each other. How we communicate about our capacities, needs, and desires. How we listen. How we use our time. How we silence the wars within ourselves. And I am taking it. I am reclaiming my life and my energy. Setting [myself on fire](#). Releasing myself from the nonprofit industrial complex complicit in Black death with it’s toxic, extractive relationship to and disregard for Black life. I have no idea what is next. I have so many more questions than answers. But I am giving myself time to explore them. That’s what I’ve wanted to do all along.

Since last Thursday, when I made the decision for today to be my last day, I’ve been creating non-stop. I’ve been writing, acknowledging all the truths I’ve ignored. I am happy, for the first time in years. Filled with so much joy that I forgot was possible. With no holds on my mind, my

time, my body other than my own. I remember to drink water, have breakfast, read, write, listen to/make music, walk, whatever I need. I'm excited to make up for all the sun I've lost over the past 3 years. I'm doing all the things I told myself I didn't have time to before. I set goals based on how I want to be, not what I need to produce for others. I am learning the skills that help me create the world I want to see instead of investing energy in the sustainability of this dead and dying obsolete circus and monster of a system. I am more productive than I've been in years. Reminding myself that I am responsible, organized, brilliant, talented, and capable of doing anything I want. I am remembering that [I am enough](#).

I can show up for community in the ways I am needed. I am able to mourn. I share prayers and meditations for those who are out in the streets expressing their righteous rage. I breathe in deep and long and slow for those of us who can no longer do so. Breathing with intention as the other lung of our collective Black body is on fire. I am reminded of hope. That a better world is possible. That we will heal and be renewed. And although it's under tragic circumstances of a pandemic and national rage, this is what I've wanted all along. Just to be a part of something meaningful. Not show up to fix complex problems I did not create and am not responsible for. I don't have to [save the world](#).

I refuse to be exploited. I will not allow my spirit to be captured. I refuse to give my energy to anything that does not feed me. I will not consent to my premature death. I am done playing dead. I finally feel free. And I want you to remember me this way. I do not believe in accidents or coincidences. I do not regret a single second of my journey. Maybe the purpose of these years was for me to tell my story. For me to see myself clearly, and to see you, so I could show you yourselves. I enjoyed connecting on lunch breaks and walks and those little glimpses of humanity I was able to share with you through laughter, truth-telling, and compassion. Remember my smile, if you've ever seen it. Remember my joy. That's what I will be chasing from now on.

## **Affirm Black life.**

I welcome all perspectives on this story. You may only remember that I was irresponsible and showed up late and completed "simple" tasks way past their due date. That would be an on brand, comfortable view to hold. I do not blame you. I do not blame myself. It's been a [roller coaster ride](#), but I appreciate every second of it for the lessons. I've learned so much about myself and my worth. My intention is not to shame or guilt anyone, but to encourage growth and transformation. Either way, I welcome your choice. I invite your understanding, your actions, but most importantly your resources. **Reimagine how you could truly show up and support Black life. Be creative.**

To my BIPOC comrades, I see you, I love you, and I affirm your life. I appreciate your story and the opportunity to witness it. I am sending all the love, [strength, courage, and wisdom](#) I have your way. I encourage you all, too, to find and tap into your own. Flow with the energy and

opportunity of this time. That may not look like quitting your job, but checking in with yourself and asking what you really need. Trusting yourselves and the truth you own. Speaking it with conviction. Asking for what you need. Taking it. Demanding it. Saying that thing you've been afraid to say. The world will try to sacrifice you, but your life and whatever you want to do with it is valuable. Sometimes the biggest thing holding us back is our own minds. Choose you. Choose life. Choose growth. Choose healing. Choose love. However that looks for you. Let us support and uplift each other. Let us [transform ourselves and the world around us](#).

To everyone else, you can listen. Ask questions with curiosity and care. Be open to the responses by listening compassionately, even if it's not what you want to hear. Even if it's inconvenient, or goes against everything you believe. You, too, have truths to tell. Share them patiently. Affirm Black life. Say hello to your Black neighbors instead of making uncomfortable faces and crossing the street when they walk by like a weirdo. Instead of buying doorbell cameras and high security systems to protect property because you think your neighborhood is unsafe, inquire about why the material conditions of the people around you have not been met and what you can do to invest in their safety and wellbeing. Support local Black organizers, Black artists, Black people. And please, stop [calling the cops](#)! If you make conditions better for the Black people around you, will inevitably make them better for everyone else. And not just the "friendly" Black people present in your social circles, but the ones on the streets. The queer, trans, immigrant, disabled, incarcerated, poor, "uneducated" Black folks too. None of us are free until all of us are.

I am telling my story for my own emancipation, but also for the accountability of the organization to shift as well. I will not consent to setting another Black or BIPOC life up for the same circumstance I was in without substantial shifts in organizational dynamics that support their wellbeing. I will not do the work of figuring out what that looks like for you. I will not be on another equity task force or planning committee or draft a proposal or fill out another survey. You have to do your own work this time, and I wish you the best on that journey. I hope you do it with care. I hope you do it fully and honestly. Schedule more than an hour for discussion. Schedule weeks, schedule months, transform! I think the world is really calling for those kinds of shifts right now. That kind of growth. The biggest lesson I've learned is that resistance to change will lead to more chaos than flowing with ease. Adapting with intention. At the very least, please just treat each other like human beings. Listen to people when they tell you what they need and who they are. Don't let my [struggle be in vain](#). And don't worry, I'll submit my overdue expense report by the end of the day. Thank you all for allowing me to speak my truth, after all that's why you hired me! Take care.

TL;DR: it was really stressful working here and I hope y'all don't put another Black person in this position without some serious transformation. Be creative about what that looks like.

Be well, be alive, and be love,

ruth



It took me a lot of emotional labor to write this, and to endure almost 3 years at this institution, and I am now without stable income indefinitely. I invite you to send some compensation if you've learned anything valuable from me over the years. Or if you would just like to invest in my wellbeing.

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Paypal: rlyson@smcm.edu

Patreon.com/momentofruth

Please also consider contributing to local Black organizers, Black movements, and Black artists.

Update: UCS released a [response](#) to my letter on June 5th. This is a cute start, but we should all hold them accountable to tangible shifts to the standards of Black and BIPOC staff who remain. I hear from such staff that they were not brought into any dialogue, and did not consent to the labor of making these decisions for the organization. Until proven otherwise, this a defensive display to protect the brand from the exposure of my letter. The cost is too high to take this work lightly. Do not forget that there are many others with their own version of my story who continue to struggle through a resistant and negligent leadership team. Neither Ken or Kathy (white leaders) have reached out to me directly or acknowledged my humanity, but Jarasa (the newly hired Organizational Effectiveness and Equity Director) has extended emotional labor and more. There are no demonstrated shifts that the behavior and dynamics that continue to overburden staff of color have shifted, or will shift. As scientists, we should hold leadership accountable to metrics. Evidence. Proof. Not just words. Not just statements.