

Been

A PATH  
(AND GUIDE)  
TOWARD

# STORYTELLING SOVEREIGNTY



## Pay BIPOC always.

If you are a predominantly and/or historically white organization/company: you should **not** ask for free labor of any kind. This means that all forms of creators, writers, speakers, panelists, artists, and the like, should all be paid. If you're claiming to value Brown and Black people, then you need to pay folx. It's that simple.

Offering *exposure* or covering expenses as "pay" is yet another form of BIPOC exploitation + tokenization that follows a long history of white folks profiting off the extraction of BIPOC culture, knowledge, and presence. Doing the work looks like supporting with an invitation and a paid invoice.

Would you expect an architect to re-design your buildings for free? No. Don't expect us to either.

Broadly speaking, established entities should always pay BIPOC creators\*. In some cases, white institutions should also consider paying BIPOC for their stories and interviews, supporting both storyteller and respective community. Our stories are sacred, beautiful, and a blessing to the platforms that get to share them.

As individuals, supporting BIPOC + more intersections of marginalized creators is a choice. Donate to, buy from, and prioritize BIPOC folx. Find their venmo/Patreon and support \$\$\$.



@noyekim

(should BIPOC offer services for free, acknowledge the power dynamics at play. Don't take advantage of new folx who do need both exposure and pay. Y'all should always pay people.)

LEARN THE HISTORY

Learn the history of your own creative medium.

Whether it's photography, fashion, architecture, academia, journalism, writing, filmmaking, art, design (and all forms of curation); they each have legacies of oppression, theft, exploitation, and dehumanization of Black and Indigenous and Brown bodies, ideas, and minds.

White folx: truly internalize that most (if not all) mediums (media) actively play a violent role in dehumanizing Black and Brown people. Our collective psyches see Black and Brown as monolith, as violent, and as disposable not by accident but by **intentional design**.

Each creative field plays their part in the erasure and in the distortion of BIPOC in media and our collective imagination.

Investigate and recognize that we do not exist apart from these legacies. There is no such thing as objective media. In order to do this work justly, unlearn + learn from the past and remember what it means to share story in solidarity, in community.

THE COMMUNITY KNOWS BEST  
FOR THEMSELVES

Hire people who represent the community whose story you're telling.

Hire creators that the community trusts. From the writer to the photographer to the editor and the designer.

Check in with the community as you move forward. Does this fit their desired narrative? *Should you* be telling the story, or can you allocate power differently in the dynamic? Is this still a mutually-beneficial and loving relationship?

Sometimes the story doesn't need to be told or isn't ready. That's okay. Folx have the right to protect their knowledge, story, and history.

CONSENT IS MANDATORY

## Consent doesn't end with a photo release

(although necessary). Are you actually bringing the community into the story-crafting process? Are you asking the people in the story if they're satisfied with the direction of the story? Its final, intended usage and message? How their photo will be captioned, used, framed, and depicted?

Consent exists beyond the signature of a release. So often, platforms take the release as *"Now we can do whatever we want with these images"* While legally: yes, ethically: NO.

There should be consent throughout the entire story-making process and an ongoing discussion between those represented and those representing.

It is the platform's and storyteller's responsibility to do right by the community.

Importantly: people can always retract their desire to tell their story, and also not desire for their story to be told at all.

Seek collaboration and a mutually-beneficial relationship.

Stories are sacred. Knowledge is sacred. Honor this.

## DIVEST AND INVEST

Stop supporting institutions that continue to let us down in 2020. It's 2020 y'all.

Support your independent magazines, platforms, Patreons, Venmo @s, artists, alongside other marginalized communities who are telling their own story how they see fit. The more we prioritize our own media that is **for us by us**, the (faster) greater sovereignty we'll have over our stories, futures, and imaginations.

Create new platforms, award ceremonies, and other institutions from the ground up, and support one another in doing so.

#StorytellingSovereignty exists when we **1.** have our own spaces and **2.** divest and dismantle institutions that aren't keeping up with the times.

We have the power to divest and invest our attention, money, and energy into what we want to see grow or diminish.

OBJECTIVITY IS A LIE

That places white folx as the most qualified observers and as the ultimate dictators of what is named Truth, what is verified and valid, and ultimately positions them as the best to catalogue everyone's story.

It casts the white (mostly cis-male) lens as the best lens for telling stories and designing what does and can exist in our imaginations.

Imagination is political.

At its core, #StorytellingSovereignty is about our right to control the narrative, imagine ourselves, and tell our stories how we see fit.

#REPRESENTATIONMATTERS

Behind – In Front – Around – To the Side of – The Lens

In other words, everywhere.

White folx still curate and control our stories and media.

We should be the writer, the director, the producer, the editor, the mentor and mentee, the publishing house, the news crew, and the chef of our own stories. If that seems like a lot, why don't we question it's a problem when white folx fill all those positions (as they do currently)? How often do we see white folx covering the experiences of BIPOC communities?

There needs to be serious consideration in that, even when our stories are told, it is still white storytellers who profit off of them while our own creators can't make a living.

Why? White media does not see BIPOC interpretations as legitimate. In other words: We must first be "verified" by the white-cis-het gaze. This often unspoken reasoning must be continually named and dismantled.

It is critical that our stories be told through our imaginaries and interpretations.  
#StorytellingSovereignty is justice.

ACADEMIA.

Academia plays just as great a role as mainstream media in forming narratives and telling stories. And yet, academia is *also* very white. Take a look at the faculty (aka the curators of what is taught and what is deemed important/worthy/respectable).

In 2017, white men made up 41%, white women made up 35% percent. That's over 3/4 of full-time faculty. If you're thinking "well that's also very binary" — exactly. Who is asking and formulating the questions that inform what the studies seek to answer? What biases do they carry? And how are these studies prioritized over lived experience, especially over BIPOC lived experience? (PS: the fact that you'll likely consider this slide more legitimate because I included the numbers is also telling.)

Communities are aware and know what's happening long before studies (stories) are published in journals. Yet, same as with media, our knowledge is not seen as valid or legitimate until white academics have "studied and proven it", or said it through their lens.

We need both more BIPOC academics and we need to center and trust lived experience. We know what's happening. Listen.

@noyekim

Put simply,

"Lived Experience = Data" – Amber Tamm

STOP CENSORING US

Even if our stories are told, there often comes a point where the message becomes diluted, shifted, or watered down.

An editor is offended. A higher-up doesn't believe that it "fits the audience". Maybe it isn't "authentic to the brand". Words are deleted, and the message changes to cater to the white gaze (and tbh: \$\$\$). It isn't enough to decide to tell our stories. They must also be told fully and **unapologetically**.

Stand up for the story and community. Create the story with what we feel needs to be included, with what we are comfortable sharing, and with all of its required nuance.

BIPOC stories should, at their fullest, be healing, Truth-telling, and unapologetic.

STORIES ARE SACRED.  
STORYTELLING IS A PRIVILEGE

And a responsibility. The stories we tell today will inform many future generations to come. It will inform how we think, perceive, imagine, and ultimately create the future.

Storytelling is future.

Yet Today, our stories are still erased, silenced, cast aside, discredited, not believed, bent, and distorted – if told at all.

Media is still white dominated, curated, determined, and run, but

We need our voices at the forefront now more than ever.

Storytelling is sacred.

We must ensure that Our words be selected with care and precision, for it is this naming practice that fills the vocabulary that we use to understand one another;

We must ensure that Our images be nurtured, formed, and depicted with love for they impact how our eyes fall on one another: lovingly, angrily, in solidarity, or in opposition.

Protect Storytelling. Defend it. Love it. And let's hold our storytellers accountable.

WE SEEK A WEALTH. WE ARE A WEALTH

Ultimately, we seek a wealth in our stories that celebrate our multitudes. Our joys and our pains.

The white gaze favors a certain narrative for BIPOC (#povertyporn and #whitesaviors) and it must be dismantled.

There is no one narrative that can encapsulate us all and, furthermore, we shouldn't need to force ourselves into a convenient box in order to garner support.

We aren't just one story. We need a wealth of storytelling that represents our wealth of multitudes as people, as humxns, told through our many intersecting and unending imaginaries.

WE ARE ALL STORYTELLERS

The idea that only a gifted few can, know how to, and should tell stories is a falsehood.

It is a falsehood that facilitates the continued manipulation and exploitation of BIPOC who are deemed, large and by, to not have the proper credentials to imagine for our/themselves.

It is a falsehood that thrives off of the unspoken guise of:

***“We, the actual creatives, know best for your story and thus should have full control over it.”***

When, in reality, that special “creativity sweet sauce” that so few supposedly have is simply ...

(white, male) privilege.

We all are storytellers. Teachers, sex workers, scientists, creators, chefs, dancers, filmmakers, curators, baristas, the peep behind the register, you, we all are.

Honor this. Know this. We’ve been telling our stories. And know you don’t need to be a “creative” to tell your own.