Post-Accountability Meeting Report for the Washington Peace Center

Prepared by Richael Faithful with the Oxalis Collective
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Introduction

On October 20, a Washington Peace Center (WPC) Board member, Katherine Fuchs, reached out to Richael Faithful, Oxalis Collective member, about a community meeting taking place on October 25. As the Oxalis Collective prepared for the meeting, we quickly understood that there was not a shared understanding of its purpose, much less outcomes. Some thought it was a community feedback meeting; some thought it was an accountability session; some thought it was the start of a restorative process; some thought it was a healing space.

Although these goals are overlapping, they are not the same, and in fact, often their purposes are in tension with one another. The meeting was designed to be a combination of what folks envisioned was necessary, and the agenda, dialogue (a format called triangle sharing) and “harvest” conversation were recorded. The only aspect that was certain, and what facilitators acknowledged at the start of the meeting, was that this meeting was the start an organizational transformation.

The tone of this report, like the accountability meeting, is rooted in healing justice principles. Healing justice is a political framework that prioritizes repair toward wholeness as fundamental to experiencing and transforming multigenerational trauma. Therefore, the vision of this report is to bring clarity about systemic harms, help birth compassionate accountability for individuals’ roles within these harmful systems, and in doing so, leave room for possibilities to transform systems and relationships.
Overall, the confusion, misdirection, and miscommunication that surrounded the meeting’s preparation mirrors the Washington Peace Center at this moment. The degree of transformation will depend on WPC’s Board’s humility and depth of its social justice commitments. This moment is the Washington Peace Center’s “last breath.” It was the community members’ visionary leadership and surprising openness of most WPC Board members who attended (among whom were four) that created possibilities for the organization beyond this meeting.

This report has also has two goals. First, it aims to paint a picture of the accountability meeting for WPC Board members who were not in the room--hopefully conveying the urgency, at this stage, that a transformation is necessary for the organization. Second, it intends to provide a starting place for a responsible, community-driven structural overhaul. What’s clear is that the accountability meeting was the start of a much longer process, which will require support from DC's organizing ecosystem. We are optimistic that there is a way forward if the WPC Board can act with urgency, care, decisiveness, and radical imagination.

The report contains three sections:

1. **State of Matters.** A summary and observations of the meeting’s themes regarding WPC’s impact on DC native/long-time residents of color, specifically East of the River Black residents, and organizers who are, and/or support these residents.

2. **Community Accountability Needs.** A summary of community members’ WPC accountability needs for DC native/long-time residents of color, organized and narrated by theme.

3. **Oxalis Collective Recommendations.** A list and rationale for next actionable steps, based on community accountability demands, and succession best practices.
We hope that this report serves as a living document for WPC's transformation in the coming months.

Section 1: State of Matters

This section distills the most prevalent meeting themes about WPC’s impact on DC native/long-time residents of color, specifically East of the River Black residents, and organizers who are and/or support these residents. It is broken down by thematic bullet point. Each theme contains recorded language from community members in attendance, and includes facilitator narrative for further context.

We hope that these themes enrich the canon, such as the existing anti-racism audit, about WPC’s long-struggle with white supremacist culture. WPC’s contradictions of its vision--envisioning a world based on respect for people and the planet through nonviolence, peace, and social justice--and its legacy of racialized harm is a tension at its breaking point.

This canon should guide a new radical commitment to the leadership of local people most threatened by systemic violence whose deep activist relationships and analysis can more effectively provide material support to organizers, and bridge gaps among local, national, and global issues.

- **WPC’s racist culture is decades-old and remains largely uninterrupted.**

  A point that we cannot emphasize enough is that WPC’s organizational history of racism is from its inception and remains unaddressed. A community member, in a moment of frustration toward the end of the meeting, explained: “[I’m] struggling with how this conversation is being framed around [staff.] What systems were in place to support them?...[Staff] are not the issue...There’s a legacy of decades of issues...” Another community member pointed out to leadership, “this started long before you were on the board.”
A superficial analysis of white supremacy allowed for the weaponization of identities against the most marginalized communities. WPC's systemic anti-racism analysis was not developed enough to recognize that bringing on non-Black board members and staff of color, in certain ways, perpetuated its legacy. A couple of Board members acknowledged their roles in not challenging their recruitment to WPC's board, as non-Black women of color. A meeting attendee elaborated that there was a “misuse of identity politics” and in the future, board and staff members must “be willing to risk individual roles when community harmed is involved.”

A Black community member explained how she was impacted by absence of WPC’s intersectionality lens--as WPC staff raised concerns about threats and surveillance fueled by Islamophobia, and the organization distanced itself from J20 protests for related reasons, staff was unresponsive to her requests for help as she was, and had been, surveilled at her home by police. She laid out, “the State is coming for everyone.” This statement lays out several failures: WPC did not have adequate infrastructure to protect the safety of its staff despite decades of peace-building work; WPC staff did not have experience, training, or support, in navigating how to help community members under threat; and WPC board members equivocated experiences of threat and surveillance that were not the same, and therefore, failed to intervene when organizers needed support, and to contribute when the broader organizing community needed WPC's presence.

- **White dominant culture leadership, regardless of perceived anti-racism commitments, are at the root of a legacy of racialized harm.**

Historically, white staff have been protected from accountability for their individual racist actions and perpetuating racialized harm to DC communities. A Black DC native community member and former staff person described “racist shit” that was said by her colleague, who was white, including a pattern of “discounting poor black folks” who lived on a “certain side of town
(wrong side of town) because Black people lived there.” When this person responded, she was labeled as “difficult to work with,” and was given an ultimatum about her employment. She was forced out, and WPC’s leadership supported the white staff member. Most important, this person emphasized that “this was not an isolated event...[there’s a] clear delineation between my experience and other Black folks’ experiences over decades, not just the past three years.”

These experiences point to something deeper than WPC’s leadership over the years--it’s emblematic of organizational white supremacist culture. A community member keenly pointed out that there’s “something deeper than people on the board.” He noted that, as a former board member, he respected a lot of current and former board members, suggesting that the issue is much more pervasive. He continued, there’s a “culture of inability to change the frame in which we want to work.” He noted that beyond new leadership, whomever is next at the helm will need to “get on the Board and then go a step and a half.”

WPC has aligned itself with a small, powerful, and unrepresentative organizer community whose members have long been questioned about their white culture orientation and depth of antiracism practice. A community member pointed out that a “small clique of white people in Petworth run shit...What they need is specific...WPC is good at working with them and that the shift needs to be back to Black communities.”

- **Tokenism is a long-used strategy by WPC to nominally address organizational systemic racism.**

WPC welcomes certain respectable Black people who won’t shift their paradigm. Another Black community member, and former board member, commented, “[a]s a Black person from DC who was on the Board, WPC loves when people can work and show up in middle class white spaces.” He pointed out that there “should be a wealth of Black folks to be on the Board, Staff, and
Advisory Council.” Yet, WPC has had very few Black board members and staff--none of whom were able to stay. A former staff member emphasized that WPC leadership should have long asked, “[we need to] figure out why Black folks aren’t staying.”

WPC has a conspicuous absence of Black and Latinx trans people from its staff or board as well. Trans people of color, specifically Black trans women, are among the most systemically vulnerable communities in DC, and in the world. A community member pointed out that “2 percent of DC identifies as trans,” and therefore, statistically, WPC should have Black and Latinx trans representation. Another community member made clear that there are “no trans women of color on [WPC’s] board or staff,” and that any existing relationships were a form of “tokenization.” Part of WPC’s transformation will need examine why it hasn’t had meaningful relationships with Black trans communities, and re-center its analysis, culture, and work, to build those relationships.

WPC’s tokenization projects Black-centeredness that is not at the heart of the organization. A former board member explained this pattern as “[WPC] gets one Black person, someone amazingly talented that they can convince...I thought that [a Black programs director] was running the organization...They make it seem Black enough for people to join...[What WPC needs is to] make a container strong enough to hold Black people first.” The former board member asked if WPC could engage Black people in the room to make this shift. He wasn’t certain which requirements were necessary so that space was held by Black folks, perhaps 40% Black, but emphasized that “agreements need to be made.”
• WPC’s legacy of systemic racism influenced a context for, and extended through, staff members.

An issue spoken to, directly and indirectly, was that harm was experienced by community members by staff members. Current but outgoing staff members did not attend the meeting but drafted a letter (see the References section) of which a copy was given to every person at the meeting. At least four community members referenced harm caused by staff members over the last year. One community member and former Activist Award recipient left the meeting early and explained that her issue was with staff (see References section, #9).

One community member detailed significant harm when, leading up to the J20 protests, a former Co-Director called undocumented young people and told them that they were at risk for deportation. Her comments are captured in the Triangle Sharing notes (see the References section), and in the Community Accountability Needs notes. A former board member shared that they had had conversations with the current/outgoing Executive Director about mistakes she made. At least one Board member acknowledged that she learned about the harmful impact of the Co-Director’s actions, and failed to hold the Co-Director accountable.

Most important, is that staff were operating within and by extension as part of the systemic racist culture of WPC. Their choices were heavily shaped by the circumstances in which they worked. need to be separate restorative processes for current WPC leadership with staff members for its failures, and outgoing staff with community members. Our conclusion is that nothing short of an organizational transformation needs to occur for any future staff to be set-up for success in furthering WPC’s mission in alignment with anti-Black racial justice principles.
- **WPC leadership has yet to come to terms with the deep impact of its harm.**

  The first community comment was this: “[WPC] is a fiery hell pit of shit.” Others nodded in agreement. Another person, visibly moved by his feelings, shared: “I’m overblown by the amount of fuckshit [WPC] has done.” He went on to describe his clear frustration, in part, stemming from hurt. Specifically, once it was no longer tolerable to stay on the Board as its sole Black member, he sent a detailed letter to other Board members about the harm he experienced--not one Board member contacted him as a result. Later, a WPC staff member expressed distrust toward him, which was summed up as “I don’t think you have WPC’s best interests at heart.” He explained, what hurts the most, is that WPC “always had amazing people on the board, and these things coinciding.” This statement reflects the embedded nature of WPC’s racism and white-middle class-liberal-centeredness which is greater than the sum of its leadership. While WPC may maintain a reputation as a DC organizing institution, it also represents profound harm to DC’s most systematically vulnerable residents.

- **Urgency is the imperative--there’s no more time.**

  The question that hung over the meeting until sharing was over was, as one community member said, “what gets WPC to move?” WPC has not been meaningfully responsive to decades of accountability interventions employed by Black and Latinx community members. The organization’s stagnation may be a more endemic issue--a former Board member pointed out that even though WPC recently hired women of color co-directors who were engaged in their communities, even issues toward which they re-directed WPC, like Islamophobia, still created friction because WPC’s investment into white liberalism peace perspective prevented a “push toward a different thing...WPC has an inability shift what peace is” in 2017.
Another community member put this frame to WPC: “operating out of fear put our lives in danger.” WPC’s systemic failure to support organizers as its mission outlines (e.g. “Women’s March should not have been able to do that shit...”) but take action that clearly endangers vulnerable Black and Latinx communities from which it is so distant, is irresponsible at best. The last words before moving into community harvest were “fucking reparations are due.”

Section 2: Community Accountability Needs

This section organizes the community “harvest” discussion that took place after the open dialogue (triangle sharing). Please see the References section for note about community accountability needs called “Community Harvest.” Many of these themes are overlapping and reinforcing, and many needs fall into multiple categories. This list is merely a starting place from which those who support WPC’s transformational process can gain a sense about community accountability needs expressed this this meeting.

- **Community organizing investments**
  - De-politicize WPC work.
  - Sponsor monthly Spokescouncil meetings.
  - Quarterly meetings with ANC reps to share community concerns.
  - People’s History of the WPC.
  - Formal public discussion of organization’s dynamics.

- **Structures that support staff wellness**
  - Specific person/people to do healing work.

- **Repair with undocumented communities**
  - Pay for legal support/community lawyers.
  - Money for visits and need inside detention; funding to get people out of detention and not just “easy” cases.
  - Sanctuary space/taking people in.
- Work with organizers and not directly with young people, putting them in fear.

- **Reparations & Redistribution of wealth**
  - Fiscal sponsorship model revisited/revised/transitioned away from anti-Black racism and toward POC-led work.
  - Push funding to marginalized communities.
    - Create a Movement Fund
      - Org that hosts welcoming committee
      - Cut of money raised for March shared with local groups.

- **Antiracism internal work**
  - Still no strong analysis, continue to embody white supremacist culture
    - Moving away from paternalism in liberal antiracism work.
    - Led and dominated by Black folks and other POC.
    - Islamophobia.
  - Analyze misuse of identity politics by WPC staff & board
    - Be willing to risk individual roles, when community harm is involved.
    - Examine structures and systems behind individual actions.
    - Fear of surveillance should disqualify leadership.
  - Operating in accordance to values at every level (including operations/finances).

- **Investment into DC natives and long-time residents**
  - Black-led staff; listen and exit interviews of current staff.
  - Organizing (physical) quasi-business space East of the River - e.g. sell political art.
○ Radical transition of the Board - everyone step down tomorrow; resignations--a community takeover.
  ■ Leaving the Board without jeopardizing the Board, or leaving a mess for others.
  ■ Parallel Board to transition out Peace Center Board.
  ■ Transitional staff?

○ Create a Vision Document to implement vision of WPC; actionable plan; reference to Dany’s strategic plan outline in email to WPC Board.

Section 3: Oxalis Recommendations

This final section are facilitator recommendations. These recommendations are based on the previously outlined community accountability needs; our own organizing background, board service experience, and legal training; and preliminary research about institutional best practices. We offer these recommendations with the caveat that neither the author of this report nor The Oxalis Collective have significant experience with institutional overhauls of this scale. We hope that these recommendations are a starting place from which WPC’s Board, along with the community members at the accountability meeting with long-term interest in WPC, can direct with the help of the organization’s lawyer and accountant.

We should also stress that a transformation of an older grassroots organization is rare. There are not many templates for a community-driven overhaul like we envision because, so often, as an established group they’re unwilling to course-correct and their support dwindles into non-existence, or communities are so deeply harmed by the group that they would prefer to let the organization die than to invest their time and labor. Either way, it’s important to acknowledge that WPC may not survive this transition. But there is a chance with courageous and humble leadership. We see this moment as a gift for WPC to re-imagine itself.

Foremost, we believe that a radical transformation is non-negotiable, starting with its current leadership. We agree with the community consensus that WPC’s
board must undergo a transition as it was founded on, and relied on up until this point, a white middle class liberal bias. A new leadership can update WPC’s paradigm toward peace, social justice, and organizing, and re-center away from whiteness with majority or all Black and Latinx DC native and long-time residents with full control.

- **Creation of a funded community working group.** Many people in the room at the accountability meeting already have plans to support this process, and have critical skills to navigate a transition. It is our recommended that rather than fund transitional staff or hire outsiders, like The Oxalis Collective, that WPC put its resources to support these community members within a working group. The working group can consist of any person who attended the accountability meeting and who has expressed an interest in continuing this process. There could be two co-facilitators who bottom-line the working group’s work. A few more people may need to be added to reflect the composite of DC communities or missing skill-sets within the current group. The working group would have access to WPC’s lawyer and accountant for questions. Members would commit to a 6-month process; allocation resources can be decided within the working group. The working group should generate its own standards of accountability that should be shared publicly. Finally, we recommend that the working group be supported by a small WPC Board, to include the Board Director. Here, we should acknowledge that mandate of the working group is to ensure a community-driven transition process for WPC. The vision outlined for the group is to support succession, not see through programs. Our assumption is that almost all of the organization’s attention and resources need to be dedicated to succession and strategic planning. We acknowledge that WPC may have grant deliverables to consider, and any such commitments should be addressed for by the Board Transition Committee. It may be possible to receive extensions based on the circumstances and a succession planning process in place.

- **Succession Process.** The working group and committee would work together to create a Board succession plan. A succession plan must include a plan for the
transition of current board members and the on-boarding of new board members. For example, Board members may have the option to resign within a specific period of time (e.g. 6 months) or until term expiration (it is our understanding that WPC have six year terms, however, after a specific period of time, they will become non-voting members and cannot hold offices); in the meanwhile, new board members chosen by the working group will be on-boarded and will create a template for the next Strategic Planning Process. We recommend that the working group create an agreement with the Board committee about the composite of board membership, and then, be responsible for identifying and inviting new board members. After some consideration, we recommend against a wholesale board resignation or the creation of a “parallel” or “shadow” board. The risks presented by both options from a fiduciary perspective are high. Also, as the current Board chair remarked, the current Board can cause further harm by walking away from the mess it helped make. So, while we respect the urgency to replace current leadership, we recommend an expedited 6-month strategy, with the working group operating much like a shadow board with fewer risks. We suggest the two last resources in the References section for context about our recommendation, and encourage further research into community-accountable succession models that may be out there.

- **Public Meeting About Transition.** We recommend, once a working group, Board committee, and succession plan is agreed on, for a public meeting about the transition to take place. The public meeting can be an opportunity for working group members to shape the new board and its strategic plan. The reason that we recommend that this meeting take place after initial agreements about the succession plan is for expediency and efficiency. Our estimation is that a public meeting will take considerable time and resources to organize well; no community member should be responsible for organizing at this level without compensation for their labor; and it is easier to welcome and integrate community input when there are basic existing agreements about the transition. Finally, we recommend that donors, funders, and other community
groups learn about the succession plan after it is in place, but before the public meeting.

- **Other Proposed Areas for the Community Working Group.** Our recommendation is that the community working group steward the succession plan process, new board member selection process, and help new board members prepare for the Strategic Planning Process, which should formally begin after the new board is in place (current Board members may still be serving out their terms but will be non-voting). We also would encourage the working group to consider three other ideas: creating a structure for and inviting affected people to participate in a restorative process between outgoing staff and Board members, and a restorative process between outgoing staff members and community members; commission a People’s History of Washington Peace Center, as suggested at the accountability meeting; and generate an interim community-funding plan, which we are calling the interim Movement Fund, based on the needs outlined in this document. Ultimately, we hope that the list of other structural and community needs (e.g. staff hiring process, staff support, organizer support infrastructure, security infrastructure, etc.) can be addressed by the new Board in its Strategic Planning Process.

**Example Timeline**

**November 1, 2017**

Submission of post-meeting report by Oxalis Collective.

**November 8, 2017**

WPC Board meeting on November 8 (open to the public). Review of Oxalis Report, discuss recommendation to replace leadership, create Transition Committee.
November 10, 2017

Executive Director resigns.

Remainder of November 2017

Creation of structure for community working group. Initial invitations to community members who have already expressed interest with supporting the process.

December 2017

Last staff member resigns from WPC.

Formal start of community working group. Beginning of succession planning with Board Transition Committee.

January 2018


February 2018

Finalize succession plan. Finalize restorative process options. Commission of a People’s History of WPC. Open the interim Movement Fund through June.

March 2018

Succession plan is announced to donors/funders and community groups including interim Movement Fund. Announcement of public meeting.

April 2018

Public meeting takes place no later than this date. Installation of new board members. New board members begin preparation for Strategic Planning Process. Invitations for restorative process options.
May 2018

Completion of a People’s History. Continue restorative processes.

June 2018


Conclusion

We hope that this report, including the collection of community needs and our proposed structure under our recommendations, helps serve the Washington Peace Center in its transformation. We are the first to acknowledge that this process will be long and challenging. Yet, we believe it’s the only way to ensure an accountable, grassroots reorganization of WPC. We appreciate WPC's and the community’s trust and wish everyone the best in this process.

References

1. Washington Peace Center Community Accountability Meeting - Agenda - October 25, 2017
2. Washington Peace Center Community Accountability Meeting - Triangle Sharing Notes - 1
5. Washington Peace Center Community Accountability Meeting - Discussion Harvest Notes - 1
6. Washington Peace Center Community Accountability Meeting - Discussion Harvest Notes - 2
7. Washington Peace Center Community Accountability Meeting - Discussion Harvest Notes - 3
8. Dany Sigwalt Letter to Washington Peace Center Board
9. Emmelia Talarico Letter to Washington Peace Center Board
10. Letter from Staff for WPC Accountability Meeting
11. Council of Nonprofits Succession Planning Tips
12. Third Section Company Succession Planning Participant’s Training Guide