

LABOR OF LOVE: WORKING FOR AND WITH A BLACK CULTURAL CENTER

Ethnographic Study of the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture in Charlotte, North Carolina



What is the issue?

How do workers in an African-American arts and culture organization navigate expectations relating to competing visions of “Black excellence”? The study examines dilemmas many staff face in an arts organization that has multi-generational stakeholders and dual local and national goals to advance the work of Black artists.

What is the research context?

The Gantt was founded as a Black cultural center in 1974 in part to preserve an African-American cultural footprint in Charlotte’s rapidly gentrifying downtown. In 1998, a major gift—including a permanent collection of African art—provided the stability and support to relocate to a dedicated downtown facility. Today the Gantt actively seeks to provide support and programming relevant to regional Black artists and communities, while also serving as an international destination for Black/African art.

What are the research findings?

The study finds that staff members’ racial and gender identity at arts organizations rooted in communities of color can make the overall work context more complex and taxing. People’s commitment and service

Research Approach

Using interviews with current and former staff, leadership, and artists and a year of participant observation, researcher Monica Patrice Barra explored the history, challenges, and aspirations of the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture. Barra underscores how racial(ized) and gender(ed) expectations reproduce inequities in work experiences and what the implications are for staff at organizations like the Gantt, most of whom identify as Black.

to the organization’s mission often goes beyond their required job responsibilities. Staff can also feel burdened or obligated by a broader imperative of to uplift the Black community and the institution.

Three themes emerged:

Culturally implicit expectations of Black excellence.

The Gantt staff reported a deep commitment to the

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organization and its mission. Several staff members conveyed a sense of belonging in the predominantly Black workplace and expressed pride in being part of the institution's legacy of Black excellence. However, Barra describes how Black excellence was experienced as a double-edged sword: attracting both celebration and scrutiny. She notes that Black achievements are often seen through the lens of exceptionalism, with little acknowledgement of the disproportionate amount of physical, intellectual, and emotional labor Black people must expend to be perceived as excellent in the face of systemic barriers. For example, staff described feeling pressure to "prove" that the Gantt was worthy of the same resources other institutions received from funders. They were also encumbered by expectations of excellence from stakeholders of different races and generations.

Navigating institutional culture and gendered labors.

Most of the Gantt's leadership, public relations, program development, and community outreach staff were female-identifying. In contrast, most male-identifying staff worked in behind-the-scenes positions that required little public engagement. While all staff worked after hours events, research revealed gender disparities in the amount and types of tasks performed. For public-facing staff, arriving early, staying late, and being the primary liaison between vendors, artists, and other guests were routine but burdensome. But this extra work was tied up with their sense of obligation to go beyond "the job" and be "of service" in the promotion of Black excellence.

Negotiating complicated relationships with regional Black artists.

The Gantt staff described tensions in serving a newer generation of local Black artists who expressed that the institution could "do more" to support their community. Staff knew that this generation of artists wanted meaningful ways to connect with the institution, including solo exhibitions of their work. The Gantt, too, was committed to supporting the development of up-and-coming local artists while continuing to bring international and national Black art to the Charlotte-area. The dual goals created tension given the museum's limited resources. Bridging these differences has become a goal of new programs that bring local emerging artists into dialogue with one another and the Gantt.

Suggested Brief Citation

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This article by the same author offers a broader case study of the Gantt's history, challenges, and evolution: <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/muan.12300>

Why does this matter?

Staff at organizations rooted in communities of color may experience greater emotional toil than their counterparts at predominantly white arts nonprofits.

Funders and supporters of these organizations might consider:

- Providing resources to support staff well-being such as funding retreats, sabbaticals, and other growth opportunities for staff.
- Augmenting grants for programs to provide additional resources for staff development and restoration.

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