

# Preface

It started with composting toilets. In 2016, Foundation for Intentional Community Executive Director Sky Blue invited me to speak at the Twin Oaks Communities Conference in rural Virginia. I had been involved in the intentional communities movement for a few years, but Twin Oaks was the first commune I had ever visited. While I was lucky to stay in a fully-plumbed cabin during the weekend, the conference site only had composting toilets for attendees. The joy that what I call hippy-dippy people have about suffering for the sake of the environment constantly amazes me. The only thing I could think about was my grandmother, who grew up without indoor plumbing. The overwhelming thought I had was, “Black people would not put up with this.”

After the conference, I wrote an article for *Communities* magazine explaining how people of color could feel left out in intentional communities. A year later, I was honored to be on a panel with other Black and brown communitarians who discussed their experiences with white progressives who thought they were doing their best. I have never lived officially “in community,” but I was already picking up on the big problem: they want us, but they don’t want us. That’s when I understood that people who believe they’re doing the work of anti-oppression are just barely scratching the surface. So I wrote this book. Nothing in it is revolutionary. There are plenty of blogs and diversity trainings that can help you understand what it means to be marginalized, but there’s only one me. I’m going to tell it my way, and I hope you find it helpful.



## I'm Your New Black Friend

Hi, I'm Crystal. I'm a Token, which means I often show up in communities as the only Black person. I'm not just Black: I'm a woman, bisexual, autistic, and disabled, and sometimes I'm the only one in all of those categories. When we talk about wanting diversity in an organization, we mean we want people who have different types of identity. That's hard to do, because while our differences make us special, our similarities make us comfortable.

You like being comfortable. You are part of a community or workplace, and you probably have a majority of certain identities in your membership. In the US and Western Europe, most organizations are majority white, educated, and middle-class. When you are in the majority, you make the rules, which means moving through the world is easier for you. When someone who is not in the majority tries to move through the same world, they may have difficulty. That's why those people are called marginalized. They live their lives in the asterisks and footnotes of majority culture. I'm here to explain what the marginalized people in your community experience, and how you can make your organization more comfortable for them.

Whether you are organizing vegans, moms, or local history buffs, you probably want diversity. You heard somewhere that diversity is great, and you've tried to recruit people who

don't look like you. You're really passionate about your community, but you're confused why people from [insert marginalized group here] never come out or apply. That's why I'm here. I've spent all of my life in community. From engineers to kinksters, Methodists to polyamorists, I've been a Token in many different situations. At some point I accepted the Crown of Tokenism and ran with it. I've spent my time trying to increase diversity in different organizations as well as speaking and writing about it. I'm usually the bearer of bad news, because diversity is less about the people you're attracting than it is about you—your values, your culture, and your community.

Here are three steps towards making your organization more diverse:

1. Prepare your community
2. Do The Work
3. Create culture conscious spaces

In order to transform into an organization that is more comfortable to marginalized people, you must do what I call The Work. The Work is called anti-racism or anti-oppression work because you are undoing power imbalances to lift up the marginalized voices in your community. I describe how to get prepared for The Work in the first part of this book. In the second part, I talk about the basics of privilege, bias, and microaggressions. Each section ends with discussion questions to help your members start doing The Work. Finally, I give practical ways that you can create meeting spaces that are more comfortable for everyone.

You may wonder, "Why should I change our community in the name of diversity? Our community is great, and great people will be attracted to it!" The truth is that access is a privilege. If you are privileged, you don't naturally see the obstacles marginalized people face in their everyday lives. You may

have heard things about Black people getting stopped by police more often or being followed around stores. Whether you believe those things happen or not, ethnic minorities have a different experience of the world. It's a similar story for queer people, people with disabilities, religious minorities, and immigrants. Lack of access is not just in our heads—it has been researched and documented by scholars and YouTubers. The stress from lack of access makes showing up in a community difficult. We have to spend energy coping with implicit bias and microaggressions. When we use all of our energy, we have less energy to do the things we want to do. We might only show a part of ourselves, or we might not show up at all.

You may think, "I already know this! I'm a great ally!" Stay tuned. Even people who think they are helping are sometimes causing harm. I find this to be true when we cross categories of marginalization (sometimes called intersectionality). For instance, you may be white and identify as queer, which leads you to feel empathy for Black people because you have been denied some civil rights. The truth is there could be ways you are alienating your Black members even with some shared experiences. I wrote this book for you, too.

If you are a Token, God bless you. The work you are doing will be thankless and hard. This book will help you to talk to your community's leadership so you don't tear your hair out. Before you start, I want you to build layers of support inside

I understand Token is a negative term. In the context of this book, I'm using it to identify the people in your organization who may feel left out because of their identity. I don't recommend calling them Tokens to their faces, but you should ask for their input during this process.

and outside your community. Use your self-care tools, and know that it is OK to take a break or stop the work completely. No work in community is worth your peace of mind.

There's a saying in the autistic community: If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism. When you finish this book, you'll have met one Black, queer, autistic woman with opinions. While I hope my experiences translate across space and time, I don't assume they will always fit your situation. Test my theories on your marginalized friends (with consent). If you don't have any, start paying people to educate you. If you're going to be a good leader, you need people who can be honest with you while sparing your feelings.

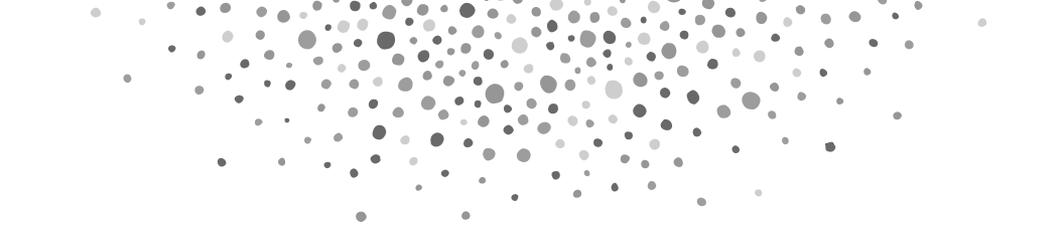
More on terminology: Why is Black capitalized? A friend started doing it on social media, and I liked it. Black is an identity, not just a social construct. Many white people don't believe they are white, so they don't get a capital letter. Why use the word queer? It's easier than spelling LGBTQ+, but that's exactly the community I'm referring to. What about disabled vs person with disability? I don't have a preference, but people say they prefer person with disability, unless they're autistic. If you've already started writing me a letter about all that, keep your pen handy.

Why aren't you using the terms people of color (POC) or Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)? I am Black and not a representative of other people of color, which could include Latinx or Hispanic, Asian, African, Indigenous, and everyone else who does not pass as white on a regular basis. While I am sure that my tips are relevant and useful to all those groups, I can only speak with authority on those identities I am familiar with.

Furthermore, there is an eagerness on the side of progressives to lump Black people in with other POCs. While

many countries experienced the dark legacy of colonization, people of the African diaspora are a unique case. The things that will create an inclusive environment for Black people are not always the same for other people of color. In this book, I encourage you to think about how to include Black people in your community instead of congratulating yourself because you have some people of color. Other marginalized people—especially the ones in your community—can help you understand the challenges unique to them.

Finally, I am always learning, but I'm a little stubborn. I grew up in a time where bisexuality meant attraction to two genders and transgender was a one-way ticket. Now, people refer to multiple genders and a nonbinary spectrum. Language and culture change, and I try to use words that are acceptable in the current time. There may be a point where this book is both outdated and problematic. Call me out or call me in, but I fully believe that problematic writing can be used for good. If my language doesn't work for you, write your own book.



# Preparing for Change

*When I worked in corporate America, I felt like I was judged more harshly than my peers. I was an engineer, so not only was I often the only Black person on my team, I was usually the only woman. When I disagreed with my boss, I was accused of being insubordinate. When I took sick days to care for my daughter, I was assumed to be slacking. When I didn't waste time gossiping, I was told I was not a team player. Many well-intentioned HR managers have welcomed marginalized people with the vision of a diverse organization, but they don't actually want diversity. They want the appearance of diversity while everyone conforms to white middle-class culture. In my job interviews, I used to ask, "What is the diversity like?" The most revealing answer was from a female Asian engineer, who immediately said, "We don't have a problem with diversity." Community organizations often react the same way.*

*When I talk about doing *The Work*, I mean the process of examining your internal beliefs about your world and the marginalized people you encounter. You have to learn what your biases are in order to counteract them. You have to understand your culture to help others adapt to it. You have to acknowledge your privilege to counterbalance it. If you are able to see the way your life differs from the lives of marginalized people, you are more able to help them feel more welcome and included.*

*The simple act of asking, "Is our community diverse?" will spark both movement and resistance in members of your organization. Prepare to engage with personal conversations, group discussions, and, if necessary, outside facilitators. You need to know who will*

*help and who will hurt your efforts. The next two chapters talk about your team members and the resistance—people who will oppose you along the way. If you already feel overwhelmed, consider hiring a diversity consultant or facilitator. This is only the first wave. Once you start making changes, you will have even stronger responses to integrate and resolve.*



## Team Members

Don't do The Work alone. When you are trying to enact change in your community, it helps to have different types of people on your team.

### **Cocreators**

Talk to your leadership about your desire for diversity. Try to get the majority of them on board before starting The Work. This may mean intense conversations about why it's important and what your vision is. Your cocreators don't need to be "woke" or experts on marginalization, but they should be open to the idea of improving the organization. Ideally, you want people with different strengths on your team: someone who can inspire people by painting a vision, someone who can talk extemporaneously about goals, someone who can respond to emails from concerned members, and someone who can facilitate conflict in the moment. If only one person fits all of those, send the rest to leadership development. If you have leaders with different years of experience, make sure that you have a mix of Young Turks and old hats in agreement. A united leadership is key to making changes more palatable to the community. If members identify warring cohorts in leadership, they will start thinking in terms of "us" versus "them," and your efforts will be less effective.

## Tokens

Identify the people who are “one of the only ones,” and talk to them about your plans. Don’t engage them so they can educate you or encourage you. If you would ask me, I’d say it’s too hard and you’re going to fail. What you want to do is tell your Tokens that you will be talking more about diversity in your community, you anticipate some changes in policies, and you will shield them from the worst of your community members’ reactions. If your Tokens are in leadership positions, discuss the same considerations and ensure that they have a support system of people that identify as they do.

## Cheerleaders

It’s helpful to involve people outside your community who know you well. These are people you can vent to and get advice from, but they don’t have decision-making power in your organization. You should have a close relationship with these people before you start. Do not choose a marginalized person just because they are in the category you want to target. Leaders tend to depend on marginalized people to carry the emotional load for them while doing The Work. They see such

My favorite type of interaction is when privileged people come up to me and tell me how grateful they are for what I’m doing. I’m shining a light on the dark world of oppression. The reality is that most groups never get The Work done. They leave diversity training feeling like they are the good guys, but they usually don’t do what I’ve asked them to do and make systemic change. I’m shining a light, but all too often you’re taking the flashlight and turning it off.

marginalized people not as experts in their chosen field, but as experts about their category of marginalization. If you are reaching out to a marginalized person to tell them about the hard work you've been doing around anti-oppression, stop. That person should be compensated for doing your Work.



## The Resistance

You will encounter resistance from your community members when you start doing The Work. That's because while most people are OK with the idea of diversity, they are usually not willing to experience discomfort for the sake of it. People join communities for various reasons. They may not see the connection between diversity and getting more out of their community. As a leader, you have to make the case for diversity. You also have to shepherd your group through the process of doing The Work. This is not something you can cover in an afternoon workshop. Explain the changes, make them, and explain them again. Talk with every single member who has concerns. Endure the drama. You may have people leave. You may have a splinter group trying to undermine you. You will have immense pressure to change your plans and go back to the way things were. Keep your vision in mind, and don't stop just because it's hard.

Before you start putting out fires, build trusting relationships between the leadership and your Tokens. They will inevitably be the target of backlash, especially if they have been vocal about the changes. Do not wait for your Tokens to come to you to set up a plan. If your organization has handled conflict badly in the past, take the time to learn mediation skills. Restorative or transformative justice are both models that

progressive organizations have used to address harm done by people in community. Whatever you do, be transparent about your conflict resolution steps.

### **Why This? Why Now?**

There are resisters who think pointing out our differences causes divisiveness. These people may think that if we only focused on what we have in common, our lives would be better. Marginalized people are marginalized because the majority culture sees our differences as a problem. Ignoring those differences means ignoring part of our identity. Tell your members that minimizing the difficulties your Tokens face harms them.

When you start talking about increasing diversity, resisters may bring up other problems in the organization. They may claim that other problems should be solved first because they are more important. If you are focusing on race, they may insist on disability access or LGBTQ+ inclusion. Think through and document why you're focusing on some aspects and not others. It's not fair to tell a marginalized group that they are less important, but there are limits to your community's energy. The resister may have a legitimate concern that could be addressed in the future.

Some resisters who have any of the privileged identities may start complaining that they are being targeted. Resisters may believe that you plan on implementing extreme policies such as limiting the number of white members or starting all meetings with an apology to marginalized people. They may take up space by bringing up examples of so-called reverse discrimination or explaining what their closest Black relative believes. They may spend time wallowing in guilt and begging for forgiveness. If they are not speaking about it in meetings, they may be talking about it to other community members in private or on social media.

When you begin to talk about marginalization, many people fear that creating equity will put them at a disadvantage. They may have never considered that most of their success in life is based on identity and not their own skills and talent. They don't want something "taken from them" and "given away," as if equity were cupcakes at a birthday party. This part of The Work is important, but it has to be done away from your Tokens. Give your privileged members their own time and space to process their feelings, and ask trusted members to be their listening ear. It may just take one personal conversation to help the resistor understand that what they are doing may harm others.

If the resistance continues, take action. Agree in advance on how to deal with personal attacks and disparaging comments. Ask your Tokens if they need help blocking the members on social media. Assign a leader or member to be their backup, arguing for them against the resistor. Use your conflict resolution steps to censure the resistor and remove them if they are not willing to be respectful. You may lose more than that resistor even when you have a fair and transparent process, but it's important to follow through.

### **The Willfully Blind**

Many people will simply not believe that marginalized people need accommodations. Research shows that many white people believe Black people have achieved all their goals of racial justice in the US. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 made discrimination based on race illegal, but Black families in the 21st century consistently have a harder time getting mortgages than white families. The one Black family you see in your neighborhood is just a small slice of the families that may have had the same income but were unable to obtain a mortgage and financing.

Many people who seek to build communities in majority white areas believe that Black people are less educated, less able to keep and maintain wealth, and more prone to crime and drug use. These assumptions are not inherent to Blackness or any minority. Doing The Work means letting go of assumptions about wealth and quality of character. Changing standards to let more people participate is not actually lowering standards; it is recognizing the impact of systemic discrimination.

People choose to be in community because they share something in common. Some resisters have assumptions about a minority's culture that gives them the impression that they are not a good fit for the community. I was once interviewed by a Black parent about the Agile Learning Center I co-founded, Gastonia Freedom School. She asked if we were welcoming to LGBTQ+ people, and I said that we were. She spent a few minutes talking about what she had learned now that she was around more of them, and how she respected their struggle even though her religion was against homosexuality.

I did not tell her I was queer or that she was a bad person, but I did say that it was important to form personal relationships with people to understand the difficulties they may face. That's what we want our children to do, and that's what she was doing. Your community may be afraid that some cultures are more racist, sexist, or homophobic than the majority culture, but the reality is that there are all types of people in all places. Be willing to have a conversation about your shared values and ideals to help others understand who would be a good fit regardless of their assumed culture.

On a different point, there are marginalized people who have not experienced systemic discrimination or who do not attribute any setbacks in their lives to their identity. Their lived experience is just as valid as anyone else's, but do not use one Token's experience to argue against another's. Believe both of

them. Understand that systemic patterns are not always applicable to individual experiences. If a Token is happy with the way their life has gone, celebrate. Just don't believe that one positive experience means all oppression has been solved.

Finally, some people who are unwilling to engage with racism may fear that accepting racism as a fact diminishes the view of the USA as the land of opportunity and freedom. The founding fathers believed whiteness and wealth gave them moral superiority. The subjugation of minorities was designed purposefully and embedded in our founding documents. Changing that system means fighting the very character of our country. It feels bad. It feels painful. It feels necessary.

### **My Time to Shine**

There will be people in your organization who are initially interested in helping increase diversity. They may be positive and encouraging as long as they have control over the direction and outcome. This resistor may be a person in leadership or someone who wants to get the credit for increasing diversity in the organization. This person may even be a Token. As other resisters pop up, however, they may become discouraged. They may think The Work is not worth the conflict and stress. They may start asking to focus on other issues or to take a break so that emotions can die down. Conflict is not what kills communities, but the inability to handle it is. Embrace conflict but don't alienate people. Before you continue The Work, renew your commitment to diversity and to the community itself. If your leadership cannot continue without infighting, hire a facilitator.

Your Tokens are people too, which means sometimes they can be assholes. Part of your job as a leader is to help people feel included without endorsing harmful behavior. Marginalized people may have legitimate trauma from harms related to their