

Black Political Economy, Solidarity Economics, and Liberation: Toward an Economy of Caring and Abundance

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Jessica Gordon-Nembhard¹

Abstract

Combining Black political economy and solidarity economy theories and practices provides alternative models for group development based on recognizing and developing internal (to the individual and to the community) capacities and creating mechanisms that equitably produce, distribute, recycle, and multiply local expertise and capital within communities of color, especially Black, communities—creating a solidarity economy of caring community for survival (successful social reproduction), sustainability, and liberation. The history of mutual aid, cooperative ownership, and economic democracy among African Americans demonstrates how economic cooperation and solidarity economics have enabled Blacks to address human needs, generate income, and at the same time be family and community friendly, in reaction to anti-Blackness and racial economic inequality. Cooperatives enable low-income residents, women, immigrants, and people of color (who often are without any avenue to gain income or assets) to provide affordable, quality goods and services in ecologically sustainable ways and generate jobs, stabilize their communities, and accumulate some assets. The history of African American cooperative ownership demonstrates that Black Americans have been successful in creating and maintaining collective and cooperatively owned enterprises that often provided not only economic stability for members and their communities but also developed many types of human and social capital and developed community-wide well-being. I discuss how this helps us to define an economics of abundance and explore possibilities for achieving economic liberation in the twenty-first century.

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Keywords

solidarity economics, Black political economy, workers' cooperatives, feminist economics, critiques of and alternatives to capitalism

¹Department of Africana Studies, John Jay College, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA

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Corresponding Author:

Jessica Gordon-Nembhard, Department of Africana Studies, John Jay College, City University of New York, New York, NY 10019-1093, USA.

Email: jgordonnembhard@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Here we are finishing the first quarter of the twenty-first century. With the compounding crises of crippling climate change, public health pandemics, growing fascism, and skyrocketing wealth inequality amidst the continuing challenges of racial justice, gender justice, education justice, health justice, and economic justice—human beings are in trouble, especially people of color.

But there is hope. We know that mutual aid, solidarity, and economic cooperation were the first and continuing strategies for human survival. We have examples of success, and we have learned lessons from our successes, even our less successful endeavors. We understand what works and we've been studying best practices.

I discuss three major take-aways on the road to economic abundance:

1. Solidarity economies, including mutual aid and cooperative economics, are the humane answer to achieving economic and environmental justice and help to address racial, gender, and other inequities. They put us on the road to economic abundance.
2. Women's labor and caring work are the basis and backbone of solidarity economies—and recognition of women of color especially will enable us to sustain and expand our solidarity economic ecosystems.
3. Recognizing human labor as the source of economic development as well as of human well-being—and embracing the dignity and sovereignty of labor in our economic structures—will move us toward achieving an economics of abundance.

2. Why Solidarity Economics? And How Does Black Political Economic Analysis Lead to Solidarity Economics?

At every level, capitalism and market societies (racial and gendered capitalism) fail African Americans and their communities—as well as most women and the global majority (Gordon-Nembhard 2020). Racial and gendered capitalism depends on maximizing profit at the expense of labor/people and the earth. In labor markets, Black unemployment levels, for example, have always been at least two times higher than for white people; and Black Americans are often relegated to the lowest-level service jobs, and the lowest wages. In capital and credit markets, African Americans have been discriminated against by not being served at all, or by being served with unequal, inferior, usurious loan products such as mortgages at subprime interest rates. In housing markets, African Americans have been excluded, or charged higher rates, or their home values have been deflated.

In the context of all this discrimination, we understand that most African Americans and the global majority have not benefitted from mainstream economic development, have often been excluded from or disadvantaged in the economy, and have experienced market failure in every market (Gordon-Nembhard 2020). In the twenty-first century and with the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become more and more obvious that most people of color cannot prosper. It is clear that we are the majority of frontline workers—with the fewest protections and still the lowest wages. We are behind in the digital arena—both in access to the internet and computers and in training for digital jobs. We started to catch up in education and in the managerial world; however, student debt is skyrocketing, and meaningful work or opportunities for wealth building are still scarce, especially for women of color (Chang 2010). Recent policies only scratch the surface and don't change the underlying edifice.

Our economy does not produce enough jobs and does not measure unemployment in a way that addresses structural barriers and systemic problems. Nor does our economy produce enough decent jobs, nor pay living wages, nor compensate people for care work.

I do not need to remind you of the constructs of inequality that we live with: economic and social constructs of patriarchy, gender and racial inequality, and exploitation of mother earth.

These paradigms normalize inequality and justify and help perpetuate class inequality by keeping groups fighting among each other, reducing possibilities of alliances against capital. In addition, intersectional oppressions and impacts are powerful (Hill Collins 2015).

Both capitalism and race and gender discrimination aspects of racial and gendered capitalism are huge barriers to achieving change and transformation. And yet, change for the better can and does happen—in part because this also engenders resistance.

As capitalism flounders or changes its stripes and rebounds, wealth inequality continues to increase, the “haves” continue to prosper and are the only ones to get real government subsidies. It therefore becomes clearer and clearer that we need community-based solidarity economic solutions focused on people, not profits, that we create for ourselves.

Over the past twenty-five years, I have explored the viability of Black American economic agency in independent self-help and cooperatively owned organizations and businesses, as an example of ways that subaltern populations, in particular, use solidarity and cooperative economic development to counter economic marginalization and discrimination (see Gordon-Nembhard 2004, 2014; Haynes and Gordon-Nembhard 1999). I have argued that cooperatives address issues such as community control in the face of transnational corporate concentration and expansion, pooling of resources and profit-sharing in communities where capital is scarce and incomes low, and increased productivity and working conditions in industries where work conditions may be poor and wages and benefits usually low. To construct notions of an economics of mutual aid, solidarity, democracy, and cooperation that will lead to an economics of abundance, I draw from W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1933 speech at the Rosenwald Economic Conference (Du Bois [1933] 1971)—where he argues to rid ourselves of a price system (i.e., eliminate markets) and be servants of the common good (i.e., practice values-based solidarity economics)—and combine it with Clyde Woods’s (1998) notion of the coproduction of economic democracy—to jointly produce our collective destinies—along with Curtis Haynes’s (1993, 2018) notions of developing human perfectibility and creating widespread community well-being and abundance.

My work has focused on how to theorize, describe, and implement such an economic ecology of caring community, and solidarity cooperative commonwealths. Such an ecosystem or political economy is characterized by greater labor and grassroots community input and participation in the planning, development, production, and governance of viable socially responsible worker- and community-owned (multistakeholder) enterprises that solve community problems and generate jobs, and income- and wealth-producing assets for individuals, families, and communities. These collective economic enterprises are structured and governed democratically, using self-management, consensus building, conflict transformation, and antioppression practices. Such a strategy entails pooling resources, providing education and training, and organizing economic activities to ensure that all needs are met for the group in equitable ways.

Such a strategy promotes comradeship rather than competition; democratic engagement rather than hierarchical management; full participation and membership rather than sole propriety; equity rather than opportunity; and collective wealth rather than profit. It exchanges positive, group-focused, creative energy for the prevailing negative, marginalizing, exploitative economic practices. The group/community creates its economic reality instead of being assaulted and robbed on the road of life, waiting for crumbs or handouts from others. Praxis is important: economic solidarity and cooperation must be developed, engaged with, and practiced.

To take this further, what if we changed our focus on economics, labor, and work to maximizing human potential (echoing Curtis Haynes)? Our labor is actually the human energy we expend to reproduce and sustain ourselves—and to produce innovations to keep perfecting social reproduction and sustainability (Haynes and Gordon-Nembhard 1999). What if we returned to being all about people and our labor to maximizing human potential and well-being rather than profits?

David Ellerman (1986) ignited the thinking about labor hiring capital instead of capital hiring labor or renting human beings. That can change our economic paradigm to focus more on work

and production, and returns going to labor rather than capital. Abolishing human rentals goes a long way to freeing us, but it still assumes a price system and markets. And may still communicate a distinction between community and labor. But community and labor are all workers. Our societies are communities of workers. As human beings, we all engage in social reproduction and caring work, invisible as well as visible, paid and unpaid, work. Gibson-Graham describes it as: “People enact economies by piecing together diverse labor practices—salaried labor, for example, with household-caring work, with services provided under the table, with reciprocated work in a childcare network, with selling products on the side, with self-provisioning work in the garden, and so on” (Gibson-Graham 2014: S151). In other words, we engage in diverse economies for survival against “capitalocentric” (Gibson-Graham 2014: S148) economic practices.

Community may seem alienated from labor when we focus so much on labor, because too many of us see labor and work as bad, and count labor as just what is paid for—something we have to do but don’t get much pleasure from, and something we would stop doing if we could. But that’s capitalist labor—capitalocentric labor—working for capitalists and/or for so-called nonprofit organizations or being unemployed by them. Working is part of what makes us human and is definitely how we sustain our lives—so we need a new, or renewed, vision of work as a positive, productive, joy-producing collective activity.

Lloyd Hogan, in his pathbreaking book *Black Political Economy* (1984), delineates internal from external labor markets (see Haynes and Gordon-Nembhard 1999). Internal labor is the labor of social reproduction and cultural production—the work, time, and effort we put into being human beings, raising children, being in community, and caring for other people so that we sustain ourselves as human beings. It also includes the social and cultural capital we produce. External labor is the paid labor we do outside our homes and communities, where we produce things other than human beings and human relationships; where we produce commodities, goods, and services exchanged through markets. This is the sphere of so-called human capital and finance capital development. Again, still in the market system—but more focused on us all being workers/laborers—how we work and who we work for may be different throughout each day, and through our life cycles. Du Bois, in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* ([1935] 1970), also focused on Blacks as laborers. However, some people reject this connotation that we are all workers, because people assume it implies we are not cultural beings. But producing culture, even when not commodified, is part of human labor, especially internal labor.

If we view an economy as being about the pursuit of the common good, and labor as the work and practice of achieving the common good, it makes more sense for what we should be doing and what kinds of economies we should have. In particular, worker cooperatives provide many of the elements and structures that privilege labor and enable economics for the common good (see Sutton and Gordon-Nembhard 2022; Novkovic and Gordon-Nembhard 2017). Toussaint, for example, notes that “alongside democratizing the ownership of land, economic democracy requires a democratization of the ownership of labor” (2019: 403).

This requires turning the notion of managing scarcity on its head, so that we focus on the economics of abundance: if work is good and fun, and we collectively control it and do it with others, and sustain ourselves as human beings by laboring, then there is no scarcity, no zero-sum game—what we can create and produce is endless. We aren’t fighting over crumbs because some people are hoarding and stealing our energy and products. An economy is a set of interlocking elements:

- production—how we reproduce ourselves, and what we create and make; what we do to nurture, preserve, and reproduce ourselves;
- how we value work and other economic activity;
- exchanges of goods and services—trade, money;
- how we regulate these activities—through markets (?), solidarity (?), consensus (?);
- how we measure these activities—qualitative/quantitative, visible/invisible.

Neoclassical economics is a theory to justify capitalism, but capitalism is just one way to organize production, exchange, and distribution, not the only effective economic structure. Depending on our values and goals, we have many different structures and options for organizing political economies.

Solidarity economics provides us with an alternative grassroots economic framework to that of neoliberal capitalist globalization (US Solidarity Economy Network n.d.). Solidarity economies are grounded in principles of solidarity and cooperation; antioppression and nonhierarchy; valuing caring and support; and human development. Solidarity economies promote social and economic democracy, equity in all dimensions (e.g., race, class, gender, etc.), and sustainability (environmental and economic). Solidarity economies are pluralist and organic, allowing for different forms and strategies in different contexts—visible and invisible (similar to Gibson-Graham’s [1996, 2014] description of “diverse economies”). This helps us to reconceive the notion of labor/work and gives us a possible strategy to decolonize capitalocentric economies. Hossein (2019) and Gordon-Nembhard (2020) provide understandings of solidarity economics framed by Black political economy. Hossein and Pierson, for example, contend that “the solidarity economy acknowledges the history of socioeconomic organizing and existing practices that recognize, tend to, and protect communities of color from the indignities they face in the economic sector” (2023: 11). Toussaint (2019) argues that “the adoption of a justice-based framing of CED [community economic development] will inspire a shift away from the principles of global capitalism toward the communitarian values of the social and solidarity economy. . . thereby promoting participatory and inclusive community economic empowerment” (381) that will “target the root causes and structural determinants of inequality in America” (387).

Similarly, feminist economics undergirds solidarity economics. Feminist economics aids us in understanding and studying the devaluing of women’s work and feminine traits; the values of social reproduction, caring, and invisible labor; work/family integration; and gender wage and occupation equality. And Black feminist theory forces us to recognize intersectionalities between gender, race, class, and sexual orientation (see Hill Collins 2000, 2015; Hossein 2019; Hossein and Pierson 2023).

Economic democracy is the means of solidarity economies. Economic decisions and activities are people-centered (not centered on profit). Multiple voices are incorporated, and multiple stakeholders participate together. Workers and invisible laborers have the largest voice in what they make, what it costs, how they work together, what they get paid, and what happens to the surplus.

Economic justice and an economics of abundance are the goals of solidarity economies. Economic exchanges and distributions are fair and equitable—allowing the greatest number of people to benefit—distributing abundance fairly. Goals also include eliminating exploitation and inequality, eliminating poverty, and eliminating private monopoly and dominance by businesses that seek profit at the expense of human need and human dignity.

Economic cooperation is one of the major practices of solidarity economics. Often called the third way or third system, cooperative economics is actually our first economic system, and mutual aid and economic cooperation are universal. Mutual aid and cooperation are used by all populations, in every era of human history, on every continent. They are represented in notions of the common good, the commonwealth, the commons, seventh-generation thinking and common destinies, collectivism, “collective work and responsibility” (from Kwanzaa principles), and mutualism and humanism. Indigenous peoples—from early African civilizations to First Nations in the Americas (Native Americans, Mesoamericans, etc.) and other aboriginal peoples—all practiced and continue to practice economic cooperation and solidarity. In modernity, they practice economic cooperation both for survival and to achieve prosperity and liberation from capitalism.

Cooperative economics is based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity—in addition to honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for

others (International Cooperative Alliance n.d.). Cooperatives are values-based viable businesses that operate according to principles of inclusion, democratic participation, one member–one vote, profit sharing, continuous education, care for community, and cooperation among cooperatives. Research finds that co-op businesses have better longevity than traditional corporations/small businesses, and both successfully address the effects of crises and survive crises better (Gordon-Nembhard 2015). Co-ops often solve problems of market failure, access, affordability, accessibility, work-life balance, and equity. People turn to co-ops more in bad times because with the profit motive subordinate to solving community problems and supporting members, co-ops address market failure in people-friendly and communal-centric ways. Co-operatives combine pooling of resources, joint buying power, and democratic decision-making with recirculating capital, sustainable people-friendly business practices, and environmental sustainability. These benefits are more and more evident in the recent growth spurt of worker co-ops and food co-ops (Sutton and Gordon-Nembhard 2022) in the current crises.

What Does Solidarity Economics Look Like in Black American Communities?

In 1933 at the famed Rosenwald Economic Conference, in his “Where Do We Go from Here” speech, W.E.B. Du Bois was very persuasive of what path we should take:

I propose as the next step which the American Negro can give to the world a new and unique gift. We have tried song and laughter and with rare good humor a bit condescending the world has received it; we have given the world work, hard, backbreaking labor and the world has let black John Henry die breaking his heart to beat the machine.

It is now our business to give the world an example of intelligent cooperation so that when the new industrial commonwealth comes, we can go into it as an experienced people and not again be left on the outside as mere beggars. . . . [I]f leading the way as intelligent cooperating consumers, we rid ourselves of the ideas of a price system and become pioneer servants of the common good, we can enter the new city as men and not mules. (Du Bois [1933] 1971: 162–63)

Du Bois raised many important concepts in this speech. “A new industrial commonwealth”—this is relevant today as our production system is changing again, perhaps creating a new digital commonwealth. Entering the new system as experienced people not beggars—with cooperatives and solidarity economies we create new proactive, leading roles for ourselves. Leading the way with economic cooperation—asserting agency, leadership, and collectivism, and showing others the new way. Using economic cooperation so that we are servants of the common good, and not mules and beggars.

Similarly, Halena Wilson, President of the Ladies’ Auxiliary to the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters (from the 1930s to ’50s) and champion of Black cooperative economic development, in 1942 argued for the wisdom of uniting forces through co-ops:

No race can be said to be another’s equal that cannot or will not protect its own interest. This new order can be brought about once the Negro acknowledges the wisdom in uniting his forces and pooling his funds for the common good of all. Other races have gained great wealth and great power by following this simple rule and it is hoped someday that the Negro will do the same. (Wilson 1942: 1–2)

This is another reference to bringing about a new order by uniting our forces and pooling our funds for the common good, becoming “pioneer servants of the common good” (in Du Bois’s words). Here are themes about the common good, and Black leadership, especially in creating a new economic paradigm with no poverty and no wealth inequality—cooperative solidarity commonwealths.

Clyde Woods's (1998) "blues epistemology" helped us to see Black American history as a history of the coproduction of economic democracy, especially in the face of racism and economic exploitation. Solidarity economies are like blues music, where artists and audiences coproduce the rhythms, rimes, tones, and even the lyrics of life in various ways to jointly produce our collective destiny. What does this history of coproduction of economic democracy look like?

My work (Gordon-Nembhard 2014) chronicles efforts by African Americans to control our own work and well-being, in people-affirming and community-affirming ways—collectively co-creating our lives, societies, etc. using mutual aid, solidarity, and cooperative economics not just for survival but for liberation. African Americans have a long and strong history of mutual aid and cooperative ownership, especially in reaction to market failures and economic racial discrimination—often a hidden history, complicated by economic marginalization, and thwarted by racial discrimination and white supremacist violence. African American activism and rebellion often focused on and continue to focus on economic justice, not just civil rights—the need for economic equality, independence, and stability (if not prosperity). Early on there was realization that without economic democracy, that without economic justice, social and political rights were hollow, or actually not achievable.

The most prolific periods of Black American cooperativism were the 1880s, 1930s–40s, and 1960s–70s—and maybe now is the fourth most prolific period. What do the periods have in common? (See Gordon-Nembhard 2014 for more details.) The 1880s and 1930s, and maybe the 2020s, had survival needs in common—the economy was in depression or recession. The 1880s and 1960s were active periods of race consciousness and transition. The 2020s will probably be considered a similar period and mirrors the brutal white supremacist backlash that occurred in the 1880s. In the 1880s and 1960s there was also a need to develop racial economic independence so that political activism and civil rights efforts could be more effective. In addition, Black organizations focused on economic liberation and deliberate co-op development during all 3 periods—and it appears this is also similar in the 2020s.

The 1880s provides an interesting example of how solidarity and cooperative economics worked together. Early labor union advocacy for worker control included development of cooperatives—worker, consumer, and producer, such as cooperatively owned mills, factories, craft production, and retail stores. The cooperative efforts as well as the labor unions were connected to the Populist movement, advocating for political rights for Black and White small farmers and laborers. The Knights of Labor, in particular, was a labor union, populist party, and co-op development organization. It included women leaders and rank and file campaign organizers, was racially integrated during the start of the Jim Crow era, used boycotts, and often organized worker cooperatives. The Colored Farmers National Alliance and Cooperative Union (1886–1891) was similarly formed but focused on and aided Black farmers and farm workers to regain rights and make a living. The Colored Farmers National Alliance and Cooperative Union provided cooperative economic options controlled by Black workers and farmers, especially to counter the continuing violence and exploitation practiced by white supremacist landowners and vigilantes (e.g., KKK) (Gordon-Nembhard 2014, 2018).

In the 1930s, the Young Negroes' Co-operative League was a national federation dedicated to teaching and supporting Black youth to start cooperative businesses (Gordon-Nembhard 2014). Founded in December 1930 by George Schuyler, Ella Jo Baker, and about twenty-five to thirty African American youth, to promote cooperative economics among Black youth to develop co-ops throughout the Black community. The Young Negroes' Co-operative League has a vision of a cooperative ecosystem that is worth considering for the twenty-first century: start with five people coming together to create a buying club, then a co-op grocery store, then a credit union. Then regional associations and regional co-op factories and warehouses would supply a growing number of co-ops and connect with the national association.

In the 1960s, the Black Panther Party put some of these strategies into practice. Though better known as a self-defense organization against police brutality, the Black Panther Party was

actually a community development, solidarity and cooperative economics network, and political party. The BPP's main activities involved intercommunalist community organizing and community economic development through a host of "survival programs pending political revolution" to combat state violence (Gordon-Nembhard 2014). They organized co-ops and collectives—clothing factories, bakeries, plumbing repair, pest control, transportation for the aged, health care (free health clinics), collective news (Panther newspaper), and communal housing.

The history of the Black co-op movement cannot be told, however, without discussing the role of Black women who had a rather unique role in Black American cooperatives, and in the Black American Cooperative Movement. I chronicle this in my book *Collective Courage* (Gordon-Nembhard 2014). Centuries of Black women leading in mutual aid—to meet vital social welfare and economic needs has been well researched (Gordon-Nembhard 2014). The majority of mutual aid societies were created and run by Black women throughout US history. Many Black women leaders started out leading mutual aid societies and moved into the co-op movement from the mutual aid movement.

An early example of Black women's economic cooperation happened in the Combahee River Colony in 1863 (Gordon-Nembhard 2014). During the Civil War, Harriet Tubman (a Union Army scout at the time) planned and aided the Union Army to liberate eastern South Carolina Gullah communities. Over 700 people were liberated along the Combahee River during the Union Army's raid, and white plantation owners and their families fled to other parts of the Confederacy. Black men join the Union army. The women war refugees remained on the land and transformed economic relations, taking over abandoned plantations, farming them, and making handicrafts as a collective. They refused to work for whites, took care of their own children and elderly, and remained independent as co-op farmers on that land throughout the remainder of the Civil War—and until the federal government gave back much of the land to the former plantation owners toward the end of Reconstruction.

Callie House and the Ex-Slave Pension Society provide another example, especially of the power of mutual aid. Founded in 1896, The Ex-Slave Pension Society was one of the earliest organizations to call for past wages and ex-slave pensions (pension legislation), that is, the first demands for reparations. It was also a mutual aid society—to provide aid and relief to members in need. The mutual aid aspect of the organization lasted until 1931, and kept the organization solvent, even as its pension policy demands were ignored and House was persecuted and, like Marcus Garvey, accused of mail fraud.

Additional Black women cooperators and their organizations in the twentieth century include (see Gordon-Nembhard 2014, 2017):

- Ella Jo Baker—Young Negroes' Co-operative League, 1930–32
- Nannie Helen Burroughs—Cooperative Industries of DC, 1936–40
- Halena Wilson—Ladies Auxiliary to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Brotherhood Co-op, 1938–40s
- Estelle Witherspoon—Freedom Quilting Bee and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (Freedom Quilting Bee was a founding member), 1960–90s
- Fannie Lou Hamer—Pig Banking and Freedom Farm, 1970s
- Peggy Armstrong—Cooperative Home Care Associates, 1980s–present
- Melbah Smith, Shirley Sherrad, Shirley Blakely, Alice Paris, and Carol P. Zippert—Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (the FSC/LAF was founded in 1967), 2000s

The long legacy of Black women's co-op leadership is impressive. I can augment this story by highlighting Nina Banks's (2020) concept of Black women's invisible labor in communities. Banks argues that Black women's invisible labor needs to be given respect as work, and as

essential work. Banks argues that the invisibility of racialized women's community activism, especially to address social, gender, and racial justice, reduces our understanding of work and the importance of community in social reproduction and the attainment of well-being:

Understanding women's work experiences requires a paradigm shift in our conceptualization of women's unpaid work that moves us beyond a narrow focus on relations between men and women within private households to one that expands our focus to include the unpaid work of women whose collective activism challenges racial, ethnic, national, caste, and class-based injustices. Women's unpaid community work is often linked to factors that affect their paid and unpaid work within firms and households. (Banks 2020: 356–57)

Banks finds that “Black women also come together as members of groups to provide resources for their communities themselves” (2020: 358). Black women in particular work in and contribute to their communities in order to create community well-being, even though this is nonmarket volunteer work above and beyond the work they do in the household and their external paid work. And it's essential work for humanity.

Furthermore, this kind of work is liberating and joyful! A 2002 study found that women and men develop endorphins from cooperating: “Choosing trust over cynicism, generosity over selfishness, makes the brain light up with quiet joy” (Angier 2002: 1). Angier reports on a study conducted at Emory University which found that women developed more endorphins than men when cooperating with another person, and the more they cooperate the stronger the joy. The neural activity in young women while playing the “Prisoner's Dilemma” game increases in the part of the brain associated with reward-seeking behavior when women chose mutualism or the cooperative path. So, all human beings get joy from cooperating, but women benefit even more than men from cooperating, and the more they cooperate the stronger their quiet joy. What a wonderful way to live.

This helps to explain why so much community-based economic justice practices occur among women, especially in Black communities, and why this will lead us to an economics of abundance.

Co-op ownership in Black communities provided an economic structure to pool resources, provide quality goods and services, and access to culturally and geographically sensitive/appropriate goods and services. It also helped to save costs; increase income and wealth; save or create decent jobs; develop collective agency and action; combat racial discrimination and marginalization; increase Black economic stability, self-sufficiency, and group independence and self-determination; and develop leadership, especially among Black women and youth (Gordon-Nembhard 2014). Through my research, I learned that these co-ops were most effective when they:

- address needs, solving community problems through solidarity economics and collective ownership;
- include rigorous, continuous education;
- combine populism, labor organizing, civil rights, women's rights, and cooperative economics;
- are promoted by strong Black organizations;
- are supported by local community.

From this research, I learned that community and organization matter. Community support—community involved in starting the co-op; community use of the co-op; community donations to the co-op; and community defense of the co-ops—strengthen individual co-ops and the Black co-op movement. Deliberate cooperative development also makes a difference. I already mentioned that the periods when the most co-ops were incubated were when there were strong Black

organizations dedicated to co-op promotion and education, especially national organizations such as the Colored Farmers National Alliance and Cooperative Union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and its Ladies Auxiliary, the Young Negroes' Co-operative League, the Black Panther Party, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and many others (Gordon-Nembhard 2014).

I also learned that education matters. Black co-ops were often begun by educational or religious institutions or started with a study group to study economic conditions and cooperative economics. Black cooperators conducted study tours and learning journeys to other co-ops. Black leaders and writers promoted cooperative education. In my research on Black cooperatives (Gordon-Nembhard 2014), I found that providing our own education and nonextractive finance were two of the most important things to developing and sustaining co-ops and solidarity economics. But also, because we still live in racial capitalism, we need to start with some level of voluntary separation, so we can control our own activity, achieve self-determination, and actually level the playing field—and amass the wealth and power we need to join forces with other people on equal footing: enter the new city as men and women, human beings and not as the mules or beggars of society. We need to start with self-finance or with ways that we control the finance. Nonextractive finance and reparations are some options—and as always, mutual aid.

What does my research look like going forward? I continue with my twenty-five years of chronicling efforts by African Americans to control their own work and well-being through solidarity and cooperative economics. I continue to learn about and study new co-op development, especially worker co-ops. I also engage in continuing research about the benefits to communities of cooperative business ownership, especially worker cooperatives, especially in Black communities. I am currently also exploring models of establishing co-ops owned by incarcerated workers while in prison, and previously incarcerated workers once out of cages. Many of the same benefits, positive impacts, and more, are apparent where there are examples. Puerto Rico is the only place in the US Commonwealth that has examples of incarcerated worker co-ops, but some other countries use this strategy. I also continue to study community wealth building, to understand and help build economies that produce and distribute community-based assets and collective wealth—to counter the economic exploitation, asset stripping, and poverty produced by capitalcentric economic practices.

Breaking Silences about Economic Solidarity

Audre Lorde challenges Black women not to be silent about the need for economic change. In her speech delivered to the Modern Language Association in 1977 in Chicago, Lorde contends:

Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today, black or not. And that visibility which makes you most vulnerable is also our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind us into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned, we can sit in our safe corners as mute as bottles, and still we will be no less afraid. . . .

We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. . . while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. . . . And there are so many silences to be broken. (Lorde 2007: 42, 44)

Let us break the silences.

In 1832, Maria Stewart ([1832] 1987) made a similar speech: “Why Sit Ye Here and Die?” She admonished:

If we say we will go to a foreign land, the famine and the pestilence are there, and there we shall die.
If we sit here, we shall die. Come let us plead our cause before the whites: if they save us alive, we shall live—and if they kill us, we shall but die.

This is the existential dilemma, do we act/resist or be passive? Either way as oppressed people, our lot is to suffer and die. But it’s not that simple, we still have choices, and our choices matter for how we live, with whatever time we have and what we pass on to our children. In Audre Lorde’s words “we were never meant to survive” but we have “learned to work and speak when we are tired”—and even when we are afraid. If the worst happens no matter what we do, then we should act, and resist—because at least then there is a chance we can change things. When we focus on an economics of liberation, we understand that it is an economics of collective action and mutual aid, often led by Black women. It is us speaking out—and speaking with our actions and liberatory practices.

We have to stop being afraid to talk about a better way to live. And we have to stop assuming or believing that we don’t have viable alternatives. We do. There are so many examples throughout history of people choosing to live better lives through economic solidarity and cooperation, and people-centered values-based economic practices (Du Bois 1907; Gibson-Graham 1996; Woods 1998; Gordon-Nembhard 2014; Hossein 2019; and others). Black political economy, solidarity economics, feminist and Black feminist economics, cooperative economics, even aspects of environmental economics, help us to study and understand human survival—survival with human dignity and community well-being. These economic subdisciplines help us to discover, understand, study, and highlight democratic and humane economic practices, and the ways people engage with and create economies of liberation, caring, and abundance. Solidary and cooperative economics in particular give us a language and values-based practices so that we can work, speak, and act collectively and effectively (see Gordon-Nembhard 2020; also see Hossein 2019), even when we are afraid—even in the midst of economic trauma and state violence. To quote Du Bois ([1940] 1986: 715), “We have a chance here to teach industrial and cultural democracy to a world that bitterly needs it.”

Once we control the concept of work and labor, once we are in control of work and labor, we free ourselves. Especially if we re-create a new system—a political economy of caring community; ecosystems and ecologies of care and sustainability for the common good—as many of our ancestors practiced.

Early in the COVID pandemic, many of us talked about there being a new normal and that we would need to rise like phoenixes out of the ashes—and could use that reality to build the economy we need and want, not reproduce oppressive practices based on exploitative individualism and power and wealth inequalities. However, the forces of greed and profit maximization are strong, tenacious. It looks like again we as a society are still following the wrong path (or agreeing to be led along it) and may be missing the opportunity to return to our cooperative roots. We have to be stronger and more proactive—we have to speak and act even though we are tired. We have to be active in promoting the common good everywhere we are and go—and every chance we get. We have to be aggressive about transforming the whole oppressive system; we must be the leaders of creating new cities and new communities.

The good news is that there are pockets of economic transformation. Many more people are openly engaging in mutual aid and solidarity economics as I speak—and sustaining these liberatory practices (see Sutton and Gordon-Nembhard 2022; also see Democracy at Work Institute 2022). In these last few years, I have been in more demand than ever, to speak and consult with

groups about building solidarity cooperative economies. That's the good news, just gauging from the interest in my work—that is what is hopeful.

I see grassroots cooperative solidarity economic democracy growing the way the Malagasy proverb says love grows: like the misty rains—coming softly but flooding the river. Or perhaps also like a blizzard metaphor, seeing grassroots cooperative solidarity economic democracy as a collection of snowflakes: first scattered flurries but then snow flurries lead to a dusting of snow, and then more snow builds to a blizzard, first lightly covering the ground and then slowly but surely building more on top of more, until everything is covered in snow—our caring community and solidarity economy ecosystem.

We can slowly overwhelm our economy so everything is for the common good, every economic enterprise is human values based, democratic, worker and/or community owned, environmentally and humanly sustainable. We can rid ourselves of racial gendered capitalism and we can rid ourselves of rigid price systems controlled by the richest for their own profit, rid ourselves of the commodification of land, housing, food, and health. We will create solidarity and cooperative democratic economies, and accomplish solidarity cooperative commonwealths, if we recognize and honor existing efforts; support their expansion using human development rather than growth and profit-maximizing models; and if we build, protect, and defend the common good and caring communities. I believe our lives depend on this—and we can do it, because many of us are already doing it.

Thank you for letting me speak today.

Acknowledgment

I would like to start by acknowledging the original stewards of the land, the original inhabitants of North America, the African origins of all humanity, all the African descendants forcibly brought to this stolen land and enslaved, in addition to other indigenous peoples who have also been exploited and oppressed to enrich colonial and settler powers. I acknowledge the histories of resistance to asset stripping, anti-Blackness, patriarchy, labor oppression, and all forms of exploitation. In particular, I acknowledge and highlight those who have and use economic solidarity and cooperation for liberation, and to protect mother earth. Remembering David Gordon.

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Author Biography

Jessica Gordon-Nembhard, PhD, is Professor in the Department of Africana Studies at John Jay College, CUNY, and also Director of John Jay's McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program. She is also affiliate faculty/scholar at John Jay's Economics Program, CUNY Graduate Center, and the University of Saskatchewan, as well as a past president of the National Economic Association. Her research investigates problematics and alternative solutions in community economics, worker ownership, racial wealth inequality, community-based asset building, community-based approaches to justice, and the benefits and impacts of cooperatives on communities, especially Black American and racialized communities. She is author of numerous publications including *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (Penn State University Press 2014) and, as co-editor with Ngina Chiteji, *Wealth Accumulation and Communities of Color* (University of Michigan Press 2006).