**8 Ways People of Color are Tokenized in Nonprofits**



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There’s a type of racism in the workplace many of us have personally witnessed, perpetrated or experienced: tokenism. Nowhere have I seen this play out more than in the nonprofit space.

Tokenism is, simply, covert racism. [Racism](http://www.dismantlingracism.org/racism-defined.html) requires those in power to maintain their privilege by exercising social, economic and/or political muscle against people of color (POC). Tokenism achieves the same while giving those in power the appearance of being non-racist and even champions of diversity because they recruit and use POC as racialized props.

But how can a sector dedicated to the common good fail at being the most diverse, safe and woke-est place imaginable?

* Because the vast majority of charitable dollars are generated from [rich white men](https://www.forbes.com/sites/katiasavchuk/2016/10/05/americas-10-most-generous-philanthropists/#2d388d5f7b99), which ultimately influences the direction of funding. (This does not mean that POC are not charitable; POC have [historically](https://www.thenation.com/article/the-average-black-family-would-need-228-years-to-build-the-wealth-of-a-white-family-today/) and [systematically](http://www.channel3000.com/news/opinion/bootstrap-myth-exposed-white-inheritance-key-driver-in-racial-wealth-gap/369764533) been deprived of their ability to accumulate wealth.)
* Because the nonprofit sector thrives less as a meritocracy and more [through old, inherited wealth and power networks](https://www.theguardian.com/society/commentisfree/2017/jul/25/philanthropic-dynasties-exerting-power-us-policy). This system puts POC, especially immigrants and refugees who are newer arrivals, at a stark disadvantage.
* Because many POC simply can’t afford the low pay of nonprofit life.

All of this leads to [a sector led, operated and maintained by whites](https://www.philanthropy.com/article/Opinion-Systemic-Bias-Behind/240171). This is so prevalent that there’s even a hit series on HBO, *Insecure*, about a young Black woman who is the token minority at a nonprofit dedicated to helping Black and Latino youth, founded and run by (surprise!) whites.

So what does tokenism look and feel like? You may be tokenizing POC if:

1. **You recruit POC to formal leadership positions, but keep all the power.** That’s tokenism 101. You’ll typically see this in the hiring of a POC to be the “face” of an organization that is trying to become more diverse, while one or more white staff (or a long-standing Board Chair) maintain actual authority. I’ve also seen this play out with Board positions, with POC recruited to serve but not provided the requisite resources, support or authority to act as fiduciaries for the organization. In both instances, POC are brought in primarily for their colorful (pun intended) personal stories of hardship and discrimination to pull at the heartstrings of donors or legitimize the cause. As soon as these tokenized POC try to exercise their leadership roles, those in power will work to undermine, block and derail them. For well-meaning white colleagues, if you’re engaging in this behavior — no matter what excuse you make for it — you are tokenizing POC.

**2. Your paid staff in charge of messaging are white, and your volunteer storytellers are POC.** This type of tokenizing not only perpetuates economic inequality against POC, but strips POC of ownership over our own stories. I can think of several nonprofits principally serving one or more minority groups with all-white communications staff, that solicit POC to share their stories of success, hardship or trauma for the financial benefit of the nonprofit *without pay.*This, while the organization retains all decision-making within their white staff and keeps POC safely disempowered and on the outside. While not every storyteller can be compensated (we are talking about the nonprofit industry, after all), recruiting POC to support an organization that doesn’t value POC enough to hire or pay them is the ultimate in tokenizing. And when white communications staff are the architects and gatekeepers of what stories are best to sell or move people around a POC cause, they will surely fail to understand key motivations, perspectives and influences because they are filtering through their own privileged lens.

**3. You only hire POC for POC “stuff.”** If you consistently pick whites for coveted consultancies, expert projects or senior-staff positions *except when the work specifically relates to diversity or race relations*, that tells a story about your organization and the locus of power (#NonprofitSoWhite). How does this happen? No matter how progressive a white person you are, the sad truth is [most white people don’t have POC friends](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/08/25/three-quarters-of-whites-dont-have-any-non-white-friends/?utm_term=.fecb94fb4173). And when [70% of white people get jobs through inside connections and referrals from other whites](https://hbr.org/2014/01/white-people-do-good-things-for-one-another-and-thats-bad-for-hiring), you don’t have to be “against POC” to naturally lean on your personal trust networks to make hiring decisions. When done without awareness, those in power will only think to hire POC professionals when it’s about race and diversity, while all other “non-racial” projects seem automatically better suited for your white colleagues. Minority professionals not only bring unique perspectives having lived and thrived in a country built on racism, but they also have exceptional skills in fundraising, strategic planning, marketing, facilitation, legal and more. Now that you know that POC professionals are doubly qualified, it’s time to stop tokenizing and reassess your hiring practices.

**4. You create and maintain an organizational culture that promotes white dominance.** Most POC experience culture — their own and the dominant white culture — acutely, because we’re forced to deal with/ respond to/ defend who we are, and why “we” collectively show up and act the way we do (one Asian American must speak for ALL Asian Americans, what one Black person does or says can be imbued on ALL Black people). In contrast, most white colleagues perceive themselves as culture-less, attributing culture and a prescribed set of behaviors only to POC. This leads to cluelessness that an organization’s culture may be set up to maintain the status quo (i.e., white) and block POC from rising in leadership. Case in point: the indirect, non-transparent, downright [passive-aggressive culture](https://www.forbes.com/sites/amyanderson/2013/03/06/passive-aggressive-behavior-will-destroy-a-companys-culture/#225b43ba1cec) that is found in many nonprofits. It is not the culture of nice people, but of those with the privilege to wield power behind the scenes. It’s similar to the culture of politics: savvy politicians refrain from making open and direct statements because the less people know, the more likely they are to retain their seats and their political power. In contrast, POC have lived most of our lives outside circles of power. Our greatest tools are the truth, our voices and organizing.

Silence is the privilege of the powerful. If that’s a part of your organizational culture then POC will not only be tokenized, but also be forced to either subjugate themselves to your implicit control, or risk speaking out and being accused of being uppity / confrontational / not a good fit.

**5. You Convene Special “Diversity Councils” but don’t build POC leadership on your main Board.** I’ve been asked countless times to join a special leadership council, advisory group, convening, roundtable, task force etc., to help educate large-funder or quasi-funder institutions on POC issues. These projects, very sincerely pursued by their staff, are designed to help educate that institution on “what’s really going on” with the state of POC and help flesh out funded initiatives targeting POC groups. Aside from the fact these mostly non-POC institutions are engaging in “[trickle-down community engagement](http://nonprofitwithballs.com/2015/01/are-you-or-your-org-guilty-of-trickle-down-community-engagement/),” the POC leaders they recruit are rarely tapped to serve as members of that institution’s Board of Directors or Trustees. This is tokenizing because the Board members of these institutions — often unified not only by race [but even more so by class](http://www.businessinsider.com/foundation-boards-cant-just-be-filled-with-wealthy-people-2011-6) — want to “learn” but from a safe distance while retaining their authority and avoiding the discomfort of having anyone on the inside challenge their privileged worldview. And if your institution’s response to this is that your board does have one Asian, one Latino, and / or maybe a couple of Black members on a board of more than 20, please read #3 and #4 above and ask yourself why the numbers of POC on your board is so small.

**6. You use POC as your mouthpiece and shield against other POC.** Going back to the HBO show *Insecure*, there’s an episode where Molly, a Black attorney at a prestigious law firm, is approached by her white senior partners to speak with Rasheeda, a new Black intern, about not fitting in with their “corporate culture.” Beyond the dangers of POC not [code switching](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/23/arts/television/insecure-season-1-episode-3-recap.html?mcubz=3) to fit into white culture (see #4 above), the episode also shows the practice of whites in power seeking POC to act as mouthpieces or shields against other POC. This to me is the most heart-breaking type of tokenizing as it pits POC against each other. Sometimes the request is made explicitly, but often it’s handled so circuitously that the POC instead of feeling tokenized, may come out of the experience feeling greater power and self-importance. This type of tokenizing takes many forms, including when those in power:

* tap a POC to “keep management informed” of another POC’s work;
* hire a POC program officer to endorse and perpetuate inequitable giving strategies to POC groups;
* ask a POC to discipline another POC (is it any wonder that POC often lead Human Resource departments?);
* seek POC to endorse them as “not racist,” or to validate their work or decision-making as “racially appropriate” to shield them from critique from other POC.

The reality is that the tokenized POC has no more power than before, with the racial hierarchy remaining the same and leaving issues of race “at our level” for POC to mentally fight it out amongst ourselves. [POC are not your shield](http://reappropriate.co/2017/08/elaine-chao-asian-americans-as-shields-against-racism/). And POC must remain vigilant and hold each other lovingly accountable rather than [fall into these roles](https://thinkprogress.org/jemele-hill-espn-off-air-53f2a4baf1af/).

President Trump has his Transportation Secretary, Elaine Chao, stand next to him as he explains his controversial views on the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville.

**7. You give more money to white-led nonprofits, even when the nonprofit is focused on POC.** Of course, individual donors and foundations have the right to focus their giving on whatever cause they choose. But if you choose to invest your dollars in white-led nonprofits centered on non-white group or groups (refugee services, “inner-city” youth, overseas humanitarian aid, immigrant and civil rights, affordable housing, low-income minority workers, etc.), then you are doing the opposite of empowering POC. Despite the obvious hypocrisy, [there is still a trend for funders to give most of their dollars to minority-serving nonprofits led by whites](http://www.americantheatre.org/2017/07/21/who-gets-most-arts-money-still-large-white-organizations/). Nonprofits led and operated by POC are literally [given token amounts of funds](http://greenlining.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/InvestinginaDiverseDemocracyFoundationGivingtoMinorityLedNonprofits.pdf) compared to white-led groups. I did a (highly unscientific) study a few years ago in Guidestar of nonprofits focused on “immigrants” or “refugees,” and found in my search that the highest funded groups were headed by white people (mostly men). Funding makes the nonprofit world go round, so POC leaders and POC-led causes will remain systematically underrepresented and underfunded as long as #tokenizedfunding continues unchecked.

**8. You intuitively know the nonprofit space would benefit from more POC leaders, but you don’t really know *why*.** This last reason goes to the heart of how even well-intentioned, white nonprofit leaders may inadvertently tokenize POC. I have had the benefit of working with many amazing white nonprofit workers and philanthropists over the years, all of who get the importance of recruiting, hiring and supporting more POC in nonprofit leadership. Many of these folks have read Ta-Nehisi Coates, can quote Martin Luther King, Jr., believe that mass deportation is a human rights violation and that Black Lives Matter. They have been to trainings on racism and proudly voted for Obama. But that’s the problem. The focus when thinking of race has been on us, the Other, vs. you and your own community. And yes, even if you don’t wear white sheets on your head or carry tiki torches in Virginia, that is part of white American culture that all whites need to grapple with as a community, rather than immediately washing your hands clean of it and joining a local BLM or Women’s march.

Just as many POC have done, our white colleagues need to look critically and without shame at their own generational history and trauma, the residue of white supremacy that persists in a country built on slavery and the construct of whiteness, and the ways it permeates your thoughts and behaviors. A white staffer who acknowledges the importance of having a POC lead may still feel, without quite knowing why, that they just *know more* than that POC, or just *feel uncomfortable* working or speaking directly with that POC, or feel *suspicious* of the value and contributions of that POC (unless, of course, it’s about “POC stuff”). Just as in life, [knowledge and awareness starts from within](https://www.quora.com/I-am-white-Thats-all-you-know-about-me-Am-I-privileged-based-on-that-alone-and-assuming-I-am-should-I-feel-guilt-and-what-should-I-do-about-it/answer/Omar-Ismail-33?share=756e5e16&srid=5vTi).

The examples above are only a few examples of tokenism. I encourage readers to share in the comments your own stories as a way to raise further awareness. I hope to share in another article strategies to stay whole and intact while doing this work. In the meantime, to both my white nonprofit colleagues and especially for my resilient POC social justice colleagues who continue to push forth despite the difficulties, stay truthful, stay vocal and support each other.