

## The Strength of Healing

*“WOMEN OF COLOUR” BY RUPI KAUR*

*our backs  
tell stories  
no books have  
the spine to  
carry*

Black women are magic, but not because of something mystical or mysterious. Our power was born—and is reborn—in the depths of tragedy, the storms of indignity, the strength of our faith and community. Our magic is in direct proportion to the pain we’ve overcome.

With grace, we have turned those things that would kill us into a balm and remedy for the grief and suffering of others. No one does this like Black women.



Right now, I am watching a dear friend die. She is a Black woman, a wife and mother, with a beauty that transcends physicality. She’s dying because she lives in a predominately Black and Brown city in Canada. And commonly, the hospitals and healthcare professionals in these nonwhite areas are inadequate.<sup>1</sup> Despite our valiant fight as Black women to get her better doctors and care at alternative hospitals, she remains trapped in a system that does not recognize her humanity. As a result, she will die. And a few days ago, still full of love and light, she told me she is ready for whatever may come. **Yvonne is magic.\***

Two years ago, my daughter, Destiny, moved to Vancouver to complete a graduate degree. On one of my visits, we went shopping on Granville Street. Anyone who’s been to the West Coast knows the reality of the homelessness crisis and, as a result, the many people on the streets begging. Downtown Vancouver is no different.

On that day, one beggar refused to be ignored by us, two Black women. As Destiny and I walked by, the beggar began shouting, “Niggers! Niggers! Niggers!” Because we didn’t stop and give her our attention and, more importantly, our money, her internal script was clearly repeating, “Who do they think they are to ignore me?” In the sea of diverse people rushing by her, she reached for a familiar weapon in her arsenal, anti-Black racism.

*“Since at least the 1400s, white supremacy has been the justification for colonization, the conquest and exploitation of non-European white lands, backed by a claim of divine sanction. European white imperialism spent centuries marching around the world, using whatever means necessary to amass and consolidate resources and wealth. Now, adding insult to injury, those who were stolen from or exploited to make that wealth—Indigenous*

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<sup>1</sup> [toronto.citynews.ca/2018/04/23/healthcare-canada-equality/](https://toronto.citynews.ca/2018/04/23/healthcare-canada-equality/)

*people, people of African descent, and many other people of colour—must apply for access to that wealth in the form of loans or grants; we must prove ourselves worthy. We are demeaned for our lack of resources, scrutinized and often denied access after all. The tactics of colonization violate us and leave us traumatized, over generations, to this very day.” – Decolonizing Wealth, Edgar Villanueva*

On that summer afternoon, the beggar employed a weapon that cut to the heart of our historical experience as descendants of slaves. Malcom X said, “You can’t have capitalism without racism.” And the truth is that the prosperity of North America, including Canada, is the result of centuries of free labour through slavery. The word “nigger” was a fundamental tool in the subjugation of my ancestors for profit and power. And on that day in Vancouver, it was being used to do the same—to remind me and my daughter of “our place.”



We had been assaulted. And this was the first assault of Destiny’s life.

I immediately began thinking about how it was impacting her. At the same time, I had a pain so deep in my chest that I struggled to think clearly through the rage. As soon as the light for the crosswalk turned green, we continued walking to our destination in silence.

I know too well the grief resulting from racism. It is isolating and lonely.<sup>2</sup> That’s why I refused to allow that beggar’s words to be the last Destiny heard on that street that day. I fought through my humiliation and anger to speak words to her heart that

would offer my daughter a path to healing. I still don’t know the extent of the damage done to my daughter that day, but I know Destiny uses that experience to forge greater alliances with people of colour. And today, it also informs the depth of racial empathy in her work in First Nations communities. **Destiny is magic.**

Six years ago, my daughter and I were excited to move to a new city to start a new chapter in our lives. She was going to university, and I was joining a new team with an opportunity to contribute my skills and gain greater experience focusing on major gifts. After one month on the job, my manager returned from her extended vacation, and in our first in-person meeting, she proceeded to warn me that one of their largest donors was a bigot. This same donor was also hosting the organization’s largest event on his property in less than a month.

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<sup>2</sup> [huckmag.com/perspectives/opinion-perspectives/n-i-g-g-e-r/](https://huckmag.com/perspectives/opinion-perspectives/n-i-g-g-e-r/)

Amazed by the ease with which my manager shared this information, I did not respond in the moment. A week later, I requested that management advise the donor prior to the event that I was the newest member of the team and that I was Black. My manager disregarded my request and said she would introduce me to the donor the morning of the event. She also said that if I felt uncomfortable then, I should let her know. I explained that this was insufficient and that I had Black guests joining me at the event, but she insisted that her plan was the preference.



Six weeks into this new position and after two months in my new city, I was fired without cause during my probationary period. I was told I was a “poor fit.”

But the story doesn’t end there.

Over the next seven months, I cautiously interviewed with several local nonprofits. In late December, one organization made me an exciting offer. The timing was perfect. Christmas was around the corner, and I could look forward to a promising new year.

Sadly, while grocery shopping on Christmas Eve, I received a nervous call from my soon-to-be manager. She led the call with an apology. She told me that, for reasons she could not explain, my employment offer had been rescinded. She encouraged me to contact her CEO for an explanation, which I did. And to my surprise, I discovered that my former manager had ruined this opportunity for me because of her perceived superiority and, ultimately, racism. The trauma of this injustice was extremely painful. My reputation was being attacked and my ability to provide for my family limited. However, I don’t let this experience or others stop me from contributing to a sector that has clear dividing lines. **I am magic.**

These are only a few examples in the ocean of microinsults, aggressions, exclusions, discrimination and racism that I’ve witnessed and experienced personally and professionally. The injury rate for people of colour is rapid and frequent, leaving little, if any, time to heal. But what I know is that in my many circles of Black friends and colleagues, we *are* our own healing.

We validate each other’s grief, we hold space for our pain and we value Black bodies, hearts and minds so we can find a measure of comfort and belonging in this world.

While writing this, my interest in our healing process as Black people has piqued. In the face of persistent brutality and ignorant yet flagrant acts of subtle daily oppression and overt discrimination, we could be easily consumed. But we are not.

The incessant disregard, the indignity, the humiliation of exclusion and the perceived superiority displayed in meetings, in interviews and on the faces of store clerks, bank tellers, teachers, fundraisers, donors and others everywhere we go are overwhelming. Yet we persist.

There are rarely apologies or any acknowledgment of the racial terrorism we experience, yet diversity and inclusion initiatives abound.

Even now, I am caught in the pain of a persistent affliction that never fully allows me to reach a place beyond healing.

I understand grief to be a natural reaction to racism and intersectional violence.<sup>3</sup> It affects us physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually, transnationally and transgenerationally. More importantly, not being able to fully engage in our grief is a direct outcome of chronic



experiences of racist violence.

Society demands that I resist the truth of my experience. But it is in fact out of my identity, and therefore my experience, that many powerful and precious things flow. Only what is real can heal, and healing is indeed a political act.

*“All of us who have been forced to the margins are the very ones who harbour the best solutions for healing, progress and peace by virtue of our outsider perspectives and resilience.” – Decolonizing Wealth, Edgar Villanueva*



Watching Black women turn pain and sorrow into love and laughter—that is activism.

It is pure magic.

*\*Prior to publishing this paper, my beautiful Yvonne died. Her legacy of grace and kindness will never be forgotten.*

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<sup>3</sup> [theconversation.com/amp/grief-is-a-direct-impact-of-racism-eight-ways-to-support-yourself-91750](https://theconversation.com/amp/grief-is-a-direct-impact-of-racism-eight-ways-to-support-yourself-91750)



Nneka Allen is a Black woman, a descendant of the Underground Railroad, an Ojibwa of Anderson Nation, a Mother and a sixth generation Canadian.

Born in the 70's, Nneka was raised during a time of Black power and acute political awareness in North America. As a result, the air in her childhood home was generous, brilliant and proud. Her parents and their siblings with great intentionality poured their consciousness into her multi-ethnic identity.

As a lover of justice, Nneka inspires philanthropy as a Fundraising Executive in the non-profit sector. She honours the spirit of generosity in all people and is passionate about the many contributions of Black Canadian philanthropists and fundraisers.

Nneka is also the principal and founder of The Empathy Agency. She helps organizations deliver more fairly on their mission and vision by coaching leaders and their teams to explore the impact identity has on organizational culture and equity goals.

Nneka's ultimate joy is her daughter Destiny, an Environmental Scientist working with Indigenous communities in British Columbia. Together Destiny and Nneka continue their family legacy of philanthropy and activism in Canada.

Nneka Allen, CFRE