

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

DISPATCHES

Dismantling Racism Might Require Philanthropy to Dismantle Itself (Dispatches)

Lisa Pilar Cowan

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Who would have thought Americans would be nostalgic for a week ago? Today I woke wishing that all we were managing was a global pandemic, more than 100,000 deaths in the United States, and a deepening economic crisis. I did not think that the constant fear we were carrying could have gotten this much worse, this quickly.

Over the past week, along with other colleagues at foundations and nonprofits, I watched as the racism that many white Americans keep buried just under the surface emerged in expressions of fear and violence.

I watched it come from the mouth of a dogwalker in the lovely shaded paths of Central Park's Ramble. I watched as one of our grantee organizations was dragged into a public and painful conversation about race, which started long before Covid but is leading to an existential crisis about whether and how the organization goes on.

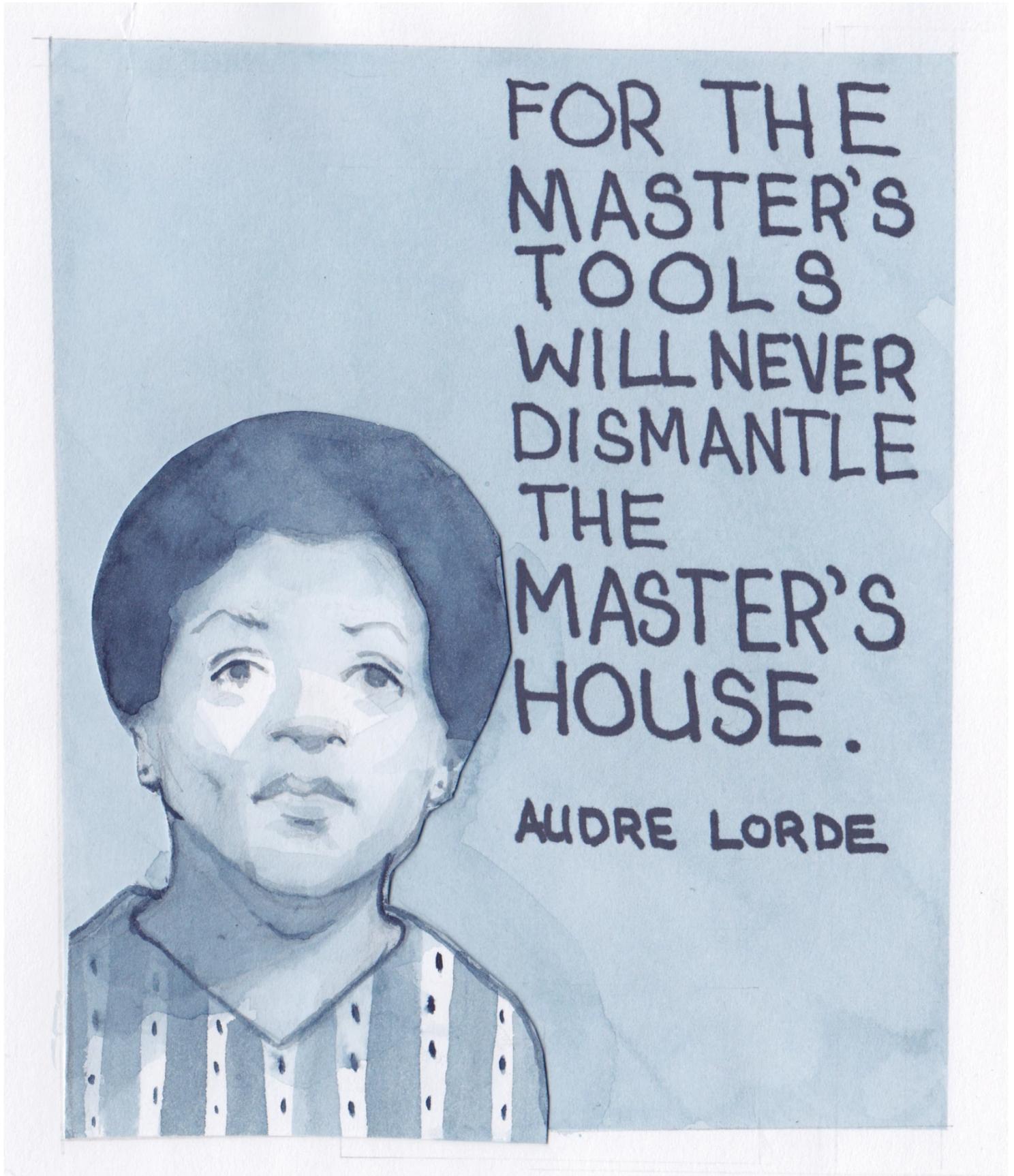


ILLUSTRATION BY MARIA MOTTOLA

I watched (though couldn't watch) Derek Chauvin murder George Floyd.

And I watched as an inevitable, energized, complicated, sometimes socially distanced, terrifying wave of protests rolled across America, and up the street where I live.

On the individual, organizational, and societal levels, I questioned whether the old ways of doing things could be updated and saved, or whether they should just be shut down.

But why this new level of fear? What is different from last week or last year or 50 years ago? The systemic racism that is killing our country and our souls has existed since slavery. As so many others have said, this pandemic just lays bare what was already manifest to many: racism, police brutality, an inadequate and unjust health care system, a federal government that does not care about or work for most of its citizens.

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Time for a Radical Overhaul

This very public moment interrupts everything. It interrupts what is now my usual “no more business as usual” column because anything short of a radical overhaul of philanthropy feels shallow and beside the point. It interrupts how we do what we do because it reveals how slow and ineffectual it is. It shows how very much we need change: new leaders, new vision, new systems, new norms.



[Grant Making in the Coronavirus Era](#)

A series of dispatches on grant making in the coronavirus era by Lisa Pilar Cowan, vice president of the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation.

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“For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change,” Audre Lorde famously wrote.

American philanthropy sits very comfortably in the master’s house. We may have repainted the walls or updated the Wi-Fi, but we are part and parcel of a system where the rich tell the middle class how to care for the poor. And it isn’t working. It has never worked.

If we are serious about bringing about change, about equity, about dismantling racism, and promoting economic equity, then we may need to dismantle ourselves along with the house. If we had governments that truly cared about their citizens and an economy that worked for all — wouldn’t foundations be out of business?

What’s Ahead

The work ahead of us is to be as useful as we can be in the moment, recognizing that things are not returning to normal, nor should they. It is our job to move massive resources quickly and easily to facilitate change, to recognize new leadership, and to listen more humbly and deeply to where the answers lie. We are lucky to be in service to those who interrupt, who disrupt, who remind us to stop fiddling around the edges because there is real work to be done.

The enormous task of undoing racist systems feels overwhelming, but this past week painfully reminds us that lives depend on figuring it out. All of us engaged in philanthropy must constantly ask ourselves: What of this work is mine? How can I do it with care and humility?

In moments like this, I am guided and comforted by the words of Jewish commentary on the Torah: “It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either” (Pirkei Avot 2:21).

Lisa Pilar Cowan is vice president of the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation. This is the fifth article in her series on [grant making in the coronavirus era](#).

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