What Pandemics Teach Us About Servant Leadership

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One of the coronavirus pandemic's less remarked on phenomena continues to be a proliferation of servant leaders.[1] Typically noted in terms of grassroots activism, community-based organization, or mutual aid societies, individuals enacting leadership through service rarely get publicized as such. Instead, outlets such as news sites or organizational websites tend to position these servant leaders as "actors on the ground" or "volunteers" who belong to a "movement," a "group," or a "network."[2] These collectivities "pop up" or "step in" or "come together" to coordinate the sharing of resources and to offer "solidarity not charity," to "tide people over," and "fill in the gaps."[3] They are characterized in terms of their egalitarianism and their "efforts" on behalf of their communities.[4] Although it often does not get said explicitly, service and inspiring others to serve are the common denominators underlying these descriptions.[5] These individuals become the leaders

[1] The breadth of scholarship on servant leadership forbids full inclusion in an article; however, some key sources include Eicher-Catt, "The Myth of Servant-Leadership"; Eaton, "Challenging and Critiquing Notions of Servant Leadership"; Ferch, *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity*; Greenleaf, "The Servant as Leader"; Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*; Greenleaf, *On Becoming a Servant-Leader*; Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant Leadership*; Liu, "Just the Servant"; Song et al., *Servant-Leadership and Forgiveness*; Patterson, "Servant Leadership and Love"; Reynolds, "Servant-Leadership"; Sims et al., "On Black Male Leadership"; Spears and Lawrence, *Focus on Leadership*; Tilgman-Havens, "The Will to (Share) Power."

[2] "Feminist-Led Grassroots Organizations Bring Critical Relief to Women Amid Pandemic"; Ott, "Coronavirus Crisis Sees Grassroots Groups Pop Up across U.K. to Help the Vulnerable"; Associated Press, "How Mutual Aid Networks Helped People through the Pandemic";

de Freytas-Tamura, "How Mutual Aid Groups Are Trying to Provide a Covid Safety Net"; Sklar, "A Year and a Half into the Pandemic, NYC's Mutual Aid Movement at a Turning Point"; Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, "Collective Care Is Our Best Weapon against Pandemic and Endemic Disasters."

[3] Ott, "Coronavirus Crisis Sees Grassroots Groups Pop Up across U.K. to Help the Vulnerable"; de Freytas-Tamura, "How Mutual Aid Groups Are Trying to Provide a Covid Safety Net"; Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, "Collective Care Is Our Best Weapon against Pandemic and Endemic Disasters."

[4] Associated Press, "How Mutual Aid Networks Helped People through the Pandemic"; Sklar, "A Year and a Half into the Pandemic, NYC's Mutual Aid Movement at a Turning Point"; Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, "Collective Care Is Our Best Weapon against Pandemic and Endemic Disasters."

[5] Greenleaf, "Servant as Leader," 4.

ABSTRACT:

This article seeks to understand what pandemics teach us about servant leadership. It analyzes two texts, which reflect on people of color's experiences becoming servant leaders during such public health crises: *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793* (1794) and *The Auntie Sewing Squad Guide to Mask Making, Radical Care, and Racial Justice* (2021). These texts balance detailed depictions of what this leadership praxis looks like with trenchant critiques of how service, racism, and leadership tend to intersect in the United States. As texts that demonstrate the value of servant leadership under pandemic conditions while also exposing its imbrication in systems of racialized oppression, the *Narrative* and the *Guide* reveal servant leadership's complicity with systemic white supremacy and corollary extractive logics in American contexts. This article builds on scholarly conversations about how race and gender impact recognition of servant leadership by drawing on the work of Saidiya Hartman, particularly two concepts she develops through analysis of post-Emancipation labor: indebted servitude and property in the self. These concepts help illuminate how racialized attitudes toward compulsory servitude extend to the praxis of servant leadership for people of color.

their communities require through their commitment to an ethos, which uses meeting people's needs as a measure of success. And yet, how pandemics function as engines of servant leadership tends to get overlooked.[6]

This article seeks to understand, therefore, what pandemics teach us about servant leadership. It analyzes two texts, which reflect on people of color's experiences becoming servant leaders during such public health crises: Absalom Jones and Richard Allen's *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793* (1794) and *The Auntie Sewing Squad Guide to Mask Making, Radical Care, and Racial Justice* (2021). Among various autobiographical or organizational accounts about what it is like to lead through service during times of outbreak, these two texts offer a unique perspective. They balance detailed depictions of what this leadership praxis looks like with trenchant critiques of how service, racism, and leadership tend to intersect in the United States. As texts that demonstrate the value of servant leadership under pandemic conditions while also exposing its imbrication in systems of racialized oppression, the *Narrative* and the *Guide* reveal servant leadership's complicity with systemic white supremacy and corollary extractive logics in American contexts.

This insight adds further nuance to existing scholarly conversations about how race and gender impact recognition of servant leadership.[7]

As Jennifer Tilgman-Havens points out, within communities that value listening, empathy, stewardship, and building community, people leading through service are more likely to find themselves and their accomplishments celebrated as exemplary leadership.[8] However, in what she calls dominant-culture organizations, becoming a servant leader may "not be perceived by superiors as exercising leadership."[9] Both the *Narrative* and the *Guide* foreground this dynamic as well. But they also make clear that in the United States, service on the part of people of color gets treated as an extractable resource used to enrich and benefit those enjoying white privilege. While the *Narrative* situates its critique within the context of exploitation of free Black labor during a time when chattel slavery was still legal in the United States, the *Guide* does so in regard to Asian and Asian Americans' history of being forced into sweatshop labor. Both examples underscore how leadership can be compelled on the part of those whose labor choices tend to be restricted to racialized and gendered servitude.

To elaborate how these texts develop critiques of compulsory elements of servant leadership for people of color under pandemic conditions, this article draws on the work of Saidiya Hartman, particularly two concepts she develops through analysis of post-Emancipation labor: indebted servitude and property in the self. On the one hand, indebted servitude describes how respectability politics and labor expectations intersected to control how formerly enslaved individuals participated in the workforce, ensuring that they became a "docile" and "productive working class."[10] On the other hand, the notion of property in the self delineates the condition of being a free, self-possessed individual who is also "free of resources" except in those "capacities" as a la-

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[6] Several helpful studies have been published on the coronavirus pandemic and opportunities it afforded to develop servant leadership approaches to several career fields. This article adds to this conversation insights on how pandemics precipitate shifts toward servant leadership. See Thwaite, "Crisis Is a Powerful Teacher"; Turner, "Servant Leadership to Support Wellbeing in Higher Education Teaching"; Ramos, "Servant Leadership towards the 21st Rich Media Technologies amidst COVID-19"; Ma et al., "Curbing Nurses Burnout during COVID-19"; Olson, "Advising Clients in Times of Crisis"; Ruiz-Palomino et al., "Can Servant Leadership Prevent Hotel Employee Depression during the COVID-19 Pandemic?"

[7] Some important interventions in how the field of servant leadership approaches race, ethnicity, and gender include Liu, "Just the Servant"; Sims et al., "On Black Male Leadership"; Tilgman-Havens, "The Will to (Share) Power"; Song et al., *Servant-Leadership and Forgiveness*; Wren and Faier, "Contemplating Context"; DeMatthews, "Effective

Leadership Is Not Enough"; Giles, "Howard Thurman, Black Spirituality, and Critical Race Theory in Higher Education"; Kezar and Lester, "Breaking the Barriers of Essentialism in Leadership Research"; Dugan, *Leadership Theory*.

[8] Tilgman-Havens, "The Will to (Share) Power," 106–7. See also Bordas, *Salsa, Soul, Spirit*.

[9] Tilgman-Havens, "The Will to (Share) Power," 106.

[10] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 127.

boring body, which "could be quantified, measured, exchanged, and alienated."[11] Both the *Narrative* and the *Guide* underscore how the practice of servant leadership by people of color is subject to expectations of docile productivity and extractive norms endured by those whose only resource is property in the self—a fact made especially visible during exigent pandemic circumstances.[12]

There is a need for the field to come to terms with servant leadership's complicity with systemic white supremacy and corollary extractive logics in order for it to be a leadership model truly invested in the greater good. This article concludes by considering what insights the *Narrative* and the *Guide* offer on how to build on what Tilgman-Havens identifies as necessary self-reflective work on the part of servant leaders. She proposes a model of liberatory leadership grounded in self-examination of "personal and communal complicity in structures, practices, and policies that assume a white male norm and ignore potent yet unquestioned assumptions regarding race and gender."[13] The *Narrative* and the *Guide* also model the importance of being actively reflective about structural inequities while leading through service. Additionally, rather than being focused only on how to produce more and more servant leaders, who can be identified by a certain evolved, progressive, self-aware social ethos, these texts value instead conceiving of servant leadership in terms of the transformation of social conditions. Ultimately, they show the potentiality of reframing servant leadership's work as reducing or even eradicating spheres of social exclusion and social death and, therefore, provide a framework for updating Robert K. Greenleaf's seminal definition.

Outbreaks as Tests of Servant Leadership

Today an influential concept across various academic disciplines, as well as in public, corporate, and private sectors, the term *servant leadership* was first defined in the 1970s as a way for Greenleaf to articulate what he saw as an emerging, "less coercive and more creatively supporting" way of approaching power and authority—a context not unlike efforts in the 2020s during the coronavirus pandemic to find imaginative ways to support public health while many elected leaders struggled to adequately respond.[14] Greenleaf explains how, in contrast to the person drawn to leadership because of "the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions," the servant leader aims to

> make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?[15]

Outbreak administers a macabre version of Greenleaf's test.[16] The exigency of a novel infection brings to the forefront questions about how people are living, working, schooling, recreating, traveling, eating, housing themselves, and caring for children and elders, as well as how to best protect them from the spread of disease in the context of those activities. Asking these kinds of questions cannot help but raise acute issues of health, obviously, but also

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[11] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 117, 112.
[12] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 112. In the American context, public health crises, such as those concerning communicable disease, repeatedly lay bare the lack of governmental infrastructure for aiding communities of color. Scholars working on racialized medicine, its history, and its ties to modern health care inequities offer important resources for understanding the pervasiveness of this problem across different eras. Some key examples of this scholarly work include Roberts, *Infectious Fear*; Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness*; Long, *Doctoring Freedom*; McCoy, *Diseased States*.
[13] Tilgman-Havens, "The Will to (Share) Power," 108.

[14] Greenleaf, "Servant as Leader," 3.
[15] Greenleaf, "Servant as Leader," 4.
[16] For other studies on servant leadership's applicability to crisis situations, see Thwaite, "Crisis Is a Powerful Teacher"; James, "Servant-Leadership in Crisis"; Song, "Servant First or Survival First?"; Aboramadan and Dahleez, "The Impact of Perceived Servant Leadership Traits."

chronic issues facing governing bodies regarding their communities' needs. The rise of mutual aid societies and grassroots efforts in the United States to support marginalized communities during the coronavirus pandemic were often an indictment of existing leadership models for not being sufficiently invested in serving the needs of these people.

Recent scholarship on the role servant leaders could play in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic evinces an inclination to see this type of leadership as unambiguously capable of ameliorating challenges, which became apparent in, for example, career settings post-2020. In these studies, servant leadership tends to be described as a "tool," "mechanism," or "resource" that can be used to fix issues, such as burnout, depression, disengagement, or lack of well-being, in professions including education, hospitality, and legal services.[17] Likewise, the disparities faced by marginalized communities may also seem potentially resolvable through a servant leadership–oriented intervention in how elected officials approach their role in society. We might ask ourselves, if a boss can learn to cultivate well-being among teachers or lawyers using a servant leadership model, then why couldn't someone in a position of political authority do the same for her constituents? Moreover, it seems like the right approach precisely because of how elements of Greenleaf's original definition are so clearly at play in what we understand about how Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color (BIPOC) were impacted by the pandemic.

We know these and other communities' needs were not being served because of ample evidence that their members were not becoming "healthier, wiser, freer, [or] more autonomous" due to the way political leaders responded to the health crisis. In the United States, BIPOC communities experienced disproportionate risks of illness and death from COVID-19. Many people from these communities also became unhoused, experienced food insecurity, or their otherwise under-resourced conditions were exacerbated. Against scientific wisdom, many Americans derided the virus as fake news at the beginning of the pandemic, and, later, antivaccination movements thwarted attempts to inoculate sufficient percentages of the population. People employed as frontline workers in low-wage jobs or living paycheck to paycheck lacked the freedom to choose to stay home and instead risked their health as employees at grocery stores, restaurants, hair salons, retirement homes, and health care facilities. Women, and particularly women of color, faced a lack of childcare as well as homeschooling obligations, which took away their autonomous choice to pursue careers and forced many to leave the workforce.

In the United States, servant leadership in the form of mutual aid and grassroots organizations emerged to redress these conditions and provide a modicum of needs-based governance. It is what motivated, for example, the formation of a mask-sewing collective comprised mostly of Asian American women called the Auntie Sewing Squad in the early months of the pandemic. Comedian, writer, and self-styled Factory Overlord of the Auntie Sewing Squad, Kristina Wong summed up the exigency this way: "It's become clear that we have no leadership, no supply chain, no infrastructure, and definitely no quarter-inch flat braided elastic."[18] She points out how governments were unprepared, unable, or unwilling to provide necessities, which resulted in people establishing ad hoc supply chains and infrastructure to distribute personal protective equipment (PPE) in the form of homemade masks.[19]

The year 2020 was not the first time in U.S. epidemical history that Americans felt bereft of good leadership during a public health crisis. During the

17 Turner, "Servant Leadership to Support Wellbeing in Higher Education Teaching"; Olson, "Advising Clients in Times of Crisis"; Ruiz-Palomino et al., "Can Servant Leadership Prevent Hotel Employee Depression during the COVID-19 Pandemic?"

18 Hong et al., *Auntie Sewing Squad Guide*, xv.
19 On the Trump administration's willful disregard of playbooks and other preparatory materials for responding to an emerging infection, see Knight, "Obama Team Left Pandemic Playbook for Trump Administration, Officials Confirm."

1793 outbreak of yellow fever in Philadelphia (then the nation's capital), congressional and executive officials of the federal government counted among the twenty thousand people who fled the city in fear.[20] Physicians were dying, nurses were difficult to find, and the city did not have a systematic way for dealing with corpses.[21] While the mayor Matthew Clarkson and a committee of twenty-six men are remembered for establishing a functioning hospital at Bush-Hill, providing food and care to the sick, and arranging for the removal of the deceased, members of the free Black community led by Jones and Allen did much of the day-to-day work to ensure these services were available to meet the needs of an ailing population. As they explain in the *Narrative*,

> Early in September, a solicitation appeared in the public papers, to the people of colour to come forward and assist the distressed, perishing, and neglected sick.... In order the better to regulate our conduct, we called on the mayor the next day, to consult with him how to proceed, so as to be most useful. The first object he recommended was a strict attention to the sick, and the procuring of nurses.... Soon after, the mortality increasing, the difficulty of getting a corpse taken away, was such, that few were willing to do it, when offered great rewards. The black people were looked to. We then offered our services in the public papers, by advertising that we would remove the dead and procure nurses.[22]

Jones and Allen underscore in this description how members of the free Black community became the infrastructure the city required to respond to yellow fever and meet the needs of its residents. The mayor may have made the original solicitation, but Jones and Allen took on the responsibility of consultation, prioritization, advertisement, and assigning of care duties.

Both the *Guide* and the *Narrative* make clear

how servant leaders are what communities need and desire in times of pandemic or epidemic crisis and that existing structures of governance can lack the ability to provide such leaders. Whereas Philadelphia's mayor applied for such assistance from the free Black community in 1793, the Aunties took on this role unasked. In both cases, the services these individuals provided are foregrounded while recognition of their leadership remains implicit. Nurses and homemade masks metonymically signify their work, respectively, because of these symbols' correspondence to community needs and how they are being met. As much as the *Guide* and the *Narrative* underscore how beneficial such a service-first approach to leadership can be for communities in distress, these narratives also help us see that it is inaccurate to characterize servant leadership tactics as tools, mechanisms, or resources to be employed as needed and shelved when not required. Such an approach may be an option for those enjoying positions of privilege. However, for people already linked to racialized and gendered roles of servitude in the United States, such leadership is not so much a choice as it is an extension of the labor society expects from marginalized individuals.

Servant Leadership's Compulsory Dimensions in U.S. Contexts

"Never did I imagine that I would be politicizing the term *sweatshop* to point to the failure of the federal government in preparing us for this crisis," writes Wong in the preface to the *Guide*.[23] Wong's satirical and, at times, controversial use of the term *sweatshop* as well as the moniker "Sweatshop Overlord" to describe her own leadership role within the Auntie Sewing Squad offers a trenchant observation of how immigrant, Asian American, and other marginalized groups are expected to labor to provide objects of necessity under exploitative working conditions, often at the expense of their own well-being or

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20 Estes and Smith, *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation*.
21 Finger, *The Contagious City*; Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead*.
22 Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 3–4.

23 Hong et al., *Auntie Sewing Squad Guide*, xii.

financial security.[24] To raise this point in the context of a lack of leadership from the federal government is to link the extractive nature of sweatshop labor to the role of servant leader adopted by people of color. Wong insinuates that not only are cloth masks being produced under duress by communities with no choice except to do so to protect themselves, but leadership itself is being extracted from them while elected officials fail to uphold their responsibilities to the constituents they represent. Such an insight gets at a crucial paradox at the core of how America perceives service—with consequences for how we understand servant leadership. That paradox develops from the fact that service is seen as both essential and valueless in American society.

The coronavirus pandemic laid bare the deep rootedness of this view of service.[25] On the one hand, countless service industries often taken for granted in American society were explicitly recognized as essential during the crisis. Whether it was in terms of gratitude toward those working minimum wage jobs at grocery or retail stores as well as public transportation and food services or in terms of vitriolic protests of early lockdowns through demands for haircuts and other beauty services, average Americans spoke up about their reliance on these industries. Moreover, the public health crisis enabled an interrogation of how service professions were undervalued and how devalued racial and ethnic minorities often worked in those jobs. And yet, the ways in which these kinds of workers were expected to continue in these jobs without meaningful increase in compensation nor the raising of the minimum wage, or ensuring access to appropriate PPE, reliable, good health care, and generous sick leave policies, indicated the extent to which, even when faced with incontrovertible proof of the essentialness of service work, American society continued to denigrate and devalue the very idea of service while continuing to demand to be served in manifold ways.

The cruel irony of such a labor reality in the United States is not lost on Wong, who underscores how the members of the Auntie Sewing Squad are stepping into a role their forebears undertook "to pay their debt to the American Dream."[26] Whereas the parents and grandparents of the Squad "did invisible, backbreaking garment labor," their descendants, she writes, "were doing it for no pay, and with far less appreciation from others of the time and skill that sewing requires as we've become a country (Amazon-)primed for instant satisfaction without consideration for the workers who make our things."[27] Furthermore, we can extrapolate from Wong's remarks how such an attitude toward service workers would also extend to their corollary roles as servant leaders. The lack of pay and appreciation for the garments the Auntie Sewing Squad produced simultaneously applies to the leadership they enacted by providing the PPE needed as the nation confronted an emerging infection. Moreover, that leadership, like producing masks, which Wong describes as "some kind of ancestral destiny," falls into the same category of seemingly unpayable debt people of color face when pursuing the American Dream.

Such a circumstance can be traced, in part, to the conditions of indebted servitude and property in the self, which emerged in the wake of chattel slavery in the United States. In this regard, the 1793 epidemic proves particularly helpful for understanding how servitude as a tool of racialized social control should be taken into consideration when theorizing servant leadership. Although the stated purpose of the *Narrative* is to correct Mathew Carey's depiction of Black volunteers as extortionists who exploited the crisis for financial gain, it serves in a broader sense as a kind of exposé of how leadership offered freely in the form of public service by a historically unfree people could become the basis for further disenfranchisement and exploitation precisely because such leadership was subject to the same racialization tactics as the service in which it was grounded.

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24 On the controversial use of the term *sweatshop*, see Hong et al., *Auntie Sewing Squad Guide*, 15–16.
25 See also McIntosh, "Care Workers in an Uncaring Economy"; Winant, *The Next Shift*.

26 Hong et al., *Auntie Sewing Squad Guide*, xiii.
27 Hong et al., *Auntie Sewing Squad Guide*, xiii.

For instance, Jones and Allen write about how the accusation of extortion was in actuality a racial double standard in which Black individuals were held to higher expectations of rectitude: "That there were some few black people guilty of plundering the distressed, we acknowledge; but in that they only are pointed out, and made mention of, we esteem partial and injurious; we know as many whites who were guilty of it; but this is looked over, while the blacks are held up to censure.—Is it a greater crime for a black to pilfer, than for a white to privateer?"[28] While Black volunteers' service to the city benefitted the sick, ameliorated living conditions, and sought to restore health, in return they received injuries to their community's reputation, a consequence white people did not have to endure.

These realities are an early instance of what Hartman has termed indebted servitude in the post-1863 era.[29] The social expectation that the Philadelphian free Black community serve in undercompensated conditions, and, moreover, do so under the strictest of moral standards to which white people were not held, presages what will become the norm for free Black labor during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Hartman documents white concerns about how to transform formerly enslaved individuals "into a rational, docile, and productive working class—that is, fully normalized in accordance with standards of productivity, sobriety, rationality, prudence, cleanliness, responsibility, and so on."[30] Such docile productivity became the proof of Black peoples' "worthiness" of their freedom, resulting in a condition in which "to be free was to be a debtor—that is, obliged and duty-bound to others."[31] The *Narrative*'s efforts to correct Carey's claims of extortion uncover an attempt to compel free Black individuals to work and work in such a way as to meet white society's standards for propriety. That such work qualified as leadership in a crisis proved immaterial. It remained subject to conditions of du-

ty-bound, docile productivity meant to keep ostensibly free and equal people of color in a marginalized place.

Such leadership should be characterized also as the kind of labor undertaken by those whose only resource was "property in the self."[32] Hartman positions this phenomenon as the especial burden of newly emancipated, formerly enslaved individuals, but, again, we can see it prefigured in 1793 as well.[33] Free Black individuals, duty-bound to engage in docile productivity, were also expected to invest their only resource—their self-possessed capacities as bodies able to work—in the preservation of a social structure that did not welcome them as equals. During the yellow fever crisis, Black volunteers did not have money to donate to the community to pay for medicinal supplies or coffins on a large scale, they were not real estate investors with property to offer as hospitals, and they were not allowed to become educated medical professionals who could use their knowledge to treat and train others. Instead, they were able-bodied enough to go door to door offering services and helping to remove the deceased, as well as providing rudimentary nursing for yellow fever victims. It was this resource of the self, which was able to labor, that became a way specifically for incarcerated individuals to obtain their freedom—a story that Jones and Allen were particularly keen to highlight in their *Narrative* as a commentary on both Black leadership and service.

Jones and Allen seek to amend two elisions about incarcerated individuals serving as nurses at Bush-Hill. First, Carey neglects to acknowledge that "two thirds of the persons, who rendered these essential services, were people of colour."[34] Second, he characterizes this servitude as representing the "honour of human nature," rather than a deliberate strategy on the part of Black community leaders to aid an ailing city.[35] As Jones and Allen clarify, elders of the African church "met to consider what they could do

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28 Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 8.
29 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 126.
30 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 127.
31 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 131.

32 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 112.
33 Hartman sees its prefiguration in Harriet Jacobs's loophole of retreat. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 112.
34 Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 5.
35 Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 4.

for the help of the sick" and applied for incarcerated individuals to be "liberated, on condition of doing the duty of nurses at the hospital at Bush-Hill."[36] Enacting leadership in this case depended on the degree to which individuals, whose only resource was their property in the self, could be compelled to meet the needs of the sick and dying. While Carey states that incarcerated individuals "voluntarily offered themselves as nurses," Jones and Allen reword the summary to say "which they as voluntarily accepted to do so, as they did faithfully discharge, this severe and disagreeable duty."[37] The change from "offered" to "accepted" underscores how these people should not be viewed as objects to be used—and used up—in service to public health and, instead, should be remembered as undertaking a duty at great personal risk, which others refused.

In 1793, we can see service, and, by extension, servant leadership, being idealized as that which is virtuously performed for the common good. However, Jones and Allen show how they are treated as extractable resources used to benefit those enjoying positions of privilege, which is achieved by holding people of color to high standards of respectability to obscure treating their lives as disposable.[38] To counter this tendency, Jones and Allen fight to reintroduce the value of Black life as human life into the official record of the 1793 outbreak. At the crescendo of the *Narrative*, they exclaim, "When the people of colour had the sickness and died, we were imposed upon and told it was not with the prevailing sickness, until it became too notorious to be denied, then we were told some few died but not many. Thus were our services extorted *at the peril of our lives*, yet you accuse us of extorting *a little money from you*."[39] Jones and Allen underscore how Black people are asked to serve—and lead—under dangerous conditions because it was deemed socially acceptable

to treat their lives as less than human.[40] Therefore, when seeking to extol the virtues of servant leadership, we should ask ourselves the extent to which we are allowing people to become subject to extractive logics masquerading as serving the greater good.

American Models for Equitable Servant Leadership

This historical context gives us the ability to appreciate how "stepping in" or "filling the gaps" on the part of ad hoc servant leaders (who are often not recognized as such) under pandemic conditions proves limited as a means to redress the problem of elected leaders failing to uphold their responsibility to meet the needs of the people. Instead, the compulsory dimensions of servant leadership laid bare in the previous section demonstrate how leadership itself can become a way to ensure the continued exploitation of BIPOC individuals. And yet, that does not mean servant leadership cannot become a liberatory framework, as which it is often idealized. Jones and Allen as well as the Auntie Sewing Squad offer some reference points for rethinking Greenleaf's model and its applications in various institutional and social settings. Specifically, their work as servant leaders and their explicit confrontations with how their leadership was a source of racialized exploitation suggest the importance of a focus on the value of human life as a way to reconceptualize, particularly, Greenleaf's language of health and needs. If the goal is to benefit the least privileged and reduce their spheres of deprivation, then service and servant leadership oriented toward that which fosters human life provides a path forward. What if the test of successful servant leadership was not so much growths as persons, but reducing or eradicating spheres of social exclusion and social death? What if the measure was not a disciplinary mechanism, which seeks to mold individuals into one identity—servant—and, instead, a transformation of social

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36 Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 5.
37 Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 4, 5.
38 Rasaki, "From SNCC to BLM," 34.
39 Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 15 (emphasis in the original). For analysis of tendencies in American history to construct Black bodies as immune to certain diseases as a component of projects of racialization and disenfranchisement, see Hogarth, "The Myth of Innate Racial Differences between White and Black Peoples' Bodies," 1339–41.

40 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*.

conditions to value the full diversity of human life?

If we use such a test to reflect on efforts in 1793 and 2020, then it becomes clear that Jones and Allen as well as the Auntie Sewing Squad enacted this alternative version of liberatory servant leadership, too. In the *Guide*, evidence of an approach to servant leadership invested in respecting the inherent value of the lives of people in need is found in how they theorized their praxis of offering aid according to community-defined needs. Auntie member and historian Chrissy Yee Lau explains how this ethic derives from women of color feminism: "Rather than imposing ideas or solutions onto a vulnerable community, which too often creates more problems than it resolves, women of color feminism values the knowledge and the organizing of communities experiencing the vulnerabilities and asks how best to support them."[41] The Auntie Sewing Squad's praxis models how servant leaders might best envision and go about their work as an inherently collaborative exercise, which allows those in need to define how those needs should be met.

Moreover, the Auntie Sewing Squad saw its work providing PPE as inseparable from understanding how national structures, practices, and policies entailed investments in white supremacy. Akin to the self-reflective work Tilgman-Havens defines as the foundation of liberatory leadership, this praxis is called "sewing with intent."[42] As Lau explains,

> For non-Black members of the Auntie Sewing Squad, sewing with intent meant examining their own complicity and their positioning in a racially stratified society that devalued Black lives. By understanding how the disenfranchisement of BIPOC communities in the United States led to the disproportionate negative impact of COVID-19 on those communities, Aunties could resituate pandemic mask making—what some other sewing circles considered an act of charity—as an expression of solidarity.[43]

For instance, Lau took under consideration her own reliance on the police and how she was "taught from a young age to devalue Black representation and to trust the police."[44] She writes about coming to understand how her "reliance on the police complied with and enabled police harassment of and violence against Black and Brown communities."[45] The significance of sewing with intent for understanding servant leadership lies in how it situates acute crises and the needs they underscore within longer genealogies of structural oppression. The need for leadership, which can supply PPE to vulnerable communities today, also indicates a need for leadership capable of responding to the devaluation of Black and Brown lives as it has occurred over centuries of disenfranchisement, marginalization, and racialized violence.

Jones and Allen adopt precisely such a leadership style when they seek to defend the Black community from what they describe as Carey's "injurious" characterization of their work during the 1793 outbreak.[46] They insist on bringing to the forefront the racially stratified society in which they live and the wide-ranging consequences of certain actions for marginalized peoples. For instance, they anticipate and seek to circumvent potential prejudice as well as bars to employment years down the line for the 1793 volunteers: "When some of the most virtuous, that were upon most praiseworthy motives, induced to serve the sick, may fall into the service of a family that are strangers to him, or her, and it is discovered that it is one of those stigmatized wretches... is it not reasonable to think the person will be abhorred, despised, and perhaps dismissed from employment?"[47] The foremost concern of Jones and Allen is mitigating against the expansion of zones of social exclusion, which potentially could occur as a result of Carey's stigmatizing discourse. Their counter-narrative also contributes to an effort to reverse racialized exclusions by drawing attention to the systemic inequities Black people endure.

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[41] Hong et al., *Auntie Sewing Squad Guide*, 85.
[42] Hong et al., *Auntie Sewing Squad Guide*, 77.
[43] Hong et al., *Auntie Sewing Squad Guide*, 77.

[44] Hong et al., *Auntie Sewing Squad Guide*, 92.
[45] Hong et al., *Auntie Sewing Squad Guide*, 93.
[46] Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 8.
[47] Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 10.

Undoing the norms of social exclusion and death relies on putting value on caring for strangers and taking as a matter of course their humanity. The *Guide* does this care work through more than making masks. Although it may be a little remarked on aspect of the *Guide*, every section of the book includes a recipe. Often these are recipes for food, such as vegan kimchee or ube halaya, but there is also one recipe for a nourishing salve. As Laura Karlin writes about her salve recipe and the distribution of her homemade balm, "I have sent gallons of salve all over the country to Aunties, frontline medical staff, Indigenous communities, farm workers, protesters, and their community organizers. It is yet another way to care for people, to offer connection and healing at a time when we need both."[48] It matters that Karlin conceives of her work as building connections and undertaking to heal people unknown to her rather than meeting needs. It is in this way that she combats their various forms of social exclusion: by assuming that they have bodies deserving of wellness and health and that cultivating a sense of belonging was a primary objective. This attitude is at the core of the phrase "solidarity not charity," which privileges connection over logics of capitalistic exchange.

The turn of the nineteenth century may not have had recourse to this pithy slogan; however, we can see in the *Narrative* the existence of a similar refusal to treat human lives in need of care as fungible. Jones and Allen recount the story of a sick man beseeching passersby for a drink of water and a gentleman who "had not resolution enough to go into the house," instead offering eight dollars as a reward to anyone who would help.[49] As they explain, eventually a Black man offered the necessary assistance, saying, "I will supply the gentleman with water, but surely I will not take your money for it."[50] Jones and Allen classify this anecdote as one of several examples of how "more humanity, more real sensibility" was exhibited by "poor blacks" during the epidemic.[51] Marking out this space for humanity and sensibility

as forces countering the exchange logic of paying someone to help temporarily allows a different social order to exist in which those at the margins because of their race or because of an illness occupy a center defined by common humanity and a desire to live together without the coercion of cash.

In sum, compulsory servant leadership contains within it the seeds of a liberatory servant leadership model. Liberation within the praxis of servant leadership depends on several factors. First, there needs to be a clear understanding of how service has been in the context of the United States a form of racialized oppression and how that fact extends to the sphere of servant leadership. Second, self-reflection and self-awareness are key, especially for those seeking to lead from positions of privilege. Third, helping people "become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants" lies in the extent to which servant leaders can dismantle structures of social exclusion and death as well as build up discourse, policy, and actions that value the full diversity of human life. Ultimately, the model of leadership to which the Auntie Sewing Squad as well as Jones and Allen ascribe refuses to acquiesce to the idea that those who serve or who need service are fundamentally disposable, less than human, and unworthy of life. Foregrounding these perspectives may allow the field of servant leadership to acknowledge its complicity in racialized inequities and work toward a theoretical model that offers a means of redress. They are a path toward allowing the field of servant leadership to develop consciously nonextractive approaches to those whom it recognizes as leaders and what activities it sees as leadership.

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48 Hong et al., *Auntie Sewing Squad Guide*, 161.
49 Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 10.
50 Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 11.
51 Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 10.

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