

Rooted and Rising: The GOC Way of Healing, Storytelling, and Leadership

By: Desireé Robertson¹

¹Founder & Chief Visionary Officer, The GOC Collective Inc. & Founder & CEO, Sol to Root Wellness LLC

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Abstract

Rooted and Rising: Healing, Storytelling, and Leadership in The GOC Collective Inc.'s Global Ecosystem for Women and Girls of Color offers a visionary roadmap for regenerative leadership grounded in ancestral knowledge, cultural sovereignty, and collective care. Authored by Desireé Robertson, Founder & Chief Visionary Officer of The GOC Collective Inc. and Sol to Root Wellness LLC, the article traces a personal and political journey of transforming trauma into healing ecosystems, especially in the U.S. South and Global South.

Drawing on intergenerational wisdom, oral storytelling, and ritual, the GOC model moves beyond traditional programming to offer a healing-centered ecosystem rooted in its evolving SCHEMES and CIRCLE frameworks. Through mentorship circles, global retreats, narrative justice, and coalition-building, the Collective reclaims leadership as a communal, cultural act. In the face of systemic underfunding and erasure, this piece serves as both a testimony and a call to action. It is a generational invitation to co-create new cultural infrastructure and invest in the leadership of women and girls as architects of liberated futures.

Why This Moment Matters

What if the future of leadership was braided with healing? What if cultural knowledge—rooted in grief, joy, ritual, and memory—was not sidelined but centered? The GOC Collective Inc. extends this invitation to recognize women and girls of color not just as beneficiaries but as architects of new worlds. Through leadership development, cultural reclamation, and community care, The GOC nurtures the seeds of this vision, cultivating spaces where healing and transformation take root.

Listening as Leadership: An Origin Story

In 2009, I sat quietly in a circle at Girls Inc. in Memphis, Tennessee. As a newly hired program director, my role was to launch a mentoring initiative. But that day, I wasn't there to lead—I was there to listen. The girls—Black, brilliant, and spanning a range of ages—shared stories of being misread and over-policed. They spoke of silence, survival, and strength. What struck me most was not just their pain but their power—a deeper intelligence shaped by culture, community, and ancestral rhythms.

That circle echoed the ones my ancestors once held—under the moonlight, under threat, and bound by the sacred vow of survival. The South holds stories in its soil, and I realized that the leadership of girls of color was not just emerging—it had always existed. It had been ignored, misnamed, and left without resources. What we needed wasn't simply programming; instead, we required reclamation. My story is woven into a lineage of Black feminist and Indigenous resistance, carried by women who have always led, even when their names went unrecorded.

Centering a Lived Moment from the Field

During a community collaboration and wellness retreat in Costa Rica last year, I stood barefoot under a ceiba tree beside a Maleku elder—one of the oldest Indigenous tribes in the region. Although we did not share a spoken language, I felt a powerful, kindred recognition as she sang a hymn her grandmother had taught her. When she nodded and said, “We sing to the plants too. That’s how they know who we are,” I knew that moment held something sacred. History collapsed into presence. That moment is what restoration looks like.

The Urgency and the Offering

Across the United States and globally, women and girls of color continue to face systemic barriers to wellness, leadership, and cultural visibility. Traditional mentoring, education, and health programs often fail to acknowledge the intergenerational trauma, cultural assets, and lived experiences that shape their realities, especially in the U.S. South and Global South. As a result, Indigenous and local knowledge systems—including communal caregiving, plant medicine, oral storytelling, and traditional leadership—are rapidly disappearing due to extractive development, migration, and disinvestment.

Grassroots movements led by women and girls of color are rising to reclaim and restore these traditions. Yet despite their transformative work, they remain drastically underfunded. More than half of these initiatives—particularly Black feminist and Indigenous-led groups—report having no access to core operating support or sustainable infrastructure.

In the U.S., only 1.6% of philanthropic giving supports women and girls. Of that, just \$5.48 per year reaches women and girls of color, representing a mere 0.5% of total foundation giving (Ms. Foundation for Women, 2019; Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2020). This exclusion is not unique to the United States; rather, it reflects a global pattern of neglect. Globally, philanthropic systems have consistently neglected to support Black, Indigenous, and Brown women, who are generally the lifeblood of their communities but are chronically underfunded and ignored.

Around the world, women and girls of color encounter parallel obstacles to accessing resources that enable their healing, leadership, and reclamation of ancestral power. For instance, in 2022, AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development) reported that less than 1% of international-targeted aid reaches grassroots feminist movements, many of which are led by women of color (Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2020). This imbalance is not

unintentional; it reflects philanthropic structures crafted to reinforce current power dynamics instead of dismantling them.

Philanthropy, as it exists, does not prioritize the voices, needs, or leadership of Black, Indigenous, and Brown women. Nor does it seek to resource their healing or the restoration of ancestral power. And yet, these women are the keepers of cultural wisdom, the designers of community resilience, and the visionaries of free futures. To fundamentally change philanthropy, we must envision it as a force for justice that invests in the healing and leadership of girls and women of color, not only in the United States but around the world.

This is not an oversight. It is by design. Philanthropy was not built for us and certainly not for the healing of Black, Indigenous, and Brown women reclaiming ancestral authority.

Systemic Context: What the Numbers Reveal

Despite the undeniable impact of women and girls of color in transforming communities, the systems intended to support this work continue to fall short. These disparities are not abstract—they are measurable and persistent:

- Unrestricted funds for leaders of color are 76% smaller than those allocated to white-led organizations (Candid, 2020).
- In 2017, the median foundation grant to organizations led by and for women and girls of color was just \$15,000 (Chronicle of Philanthropy, 2021).
- In the U.S. South, less than 1% of philanthropic funding reached Black women and girls (Chronicle of Philanthropy, 2021).
- Only 1.6% of philanthropic giving in the U.S. supports women and girls overall, and just 0.5% reaches women and girls of color (Ms. Foundation for Women, 2020; Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2020).
- Nonprofits led by people of color experience a 1.4-point higher funding shortfall index, while those serving communities of color experience an even greater gap of 1.8 points (Candid, 2020).
- Educational disparities remain: in several states, fewer than 30% of Latinas earn bachelor's degrees, while over 50% of white women do (Education Trust, 2021).
- A global review found that 77% of peer-reviewed studies confirmed the loss of Indigenous ecological knowledge due to globalization and cultural disruption (Aswani et al., 2018).

These figures highlight the need for regenerative investment in healing, leadership, and narrative ecosystems. The GOC Collective's work exists not in isolation, but in resistance to these erasures—actively reclaiming what has long been excluded.

Peer-reviewed research confirms that women of color encounter a double jeopardy of racism and sexism, resulting in persistent underrepresentation in leadership, increased workloads, and a lack of institutional support (Blessett, 2018; Johnson, 2022; Nature, 2024; Ong et al., 2018; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). These intersectional barriers are not merely additive but mutually

reinforcing, shaping the lived realities and opportunities of women and girls of color across generations.

The Work Beneath the Work: How the GOC Collective Inc. Moves

The GOC Collective's healing-centered ecosystem is built on four core activities:

- **Restorative Leadership & Mentoring Circles:** Quarterly workshops and bi-monthly circles for women and girls of color, led by educators and community leaders, blending leadership training, storytelling, and restorative justice.
Example: In St. Petersburg, FL, and Charlotte, NC, girls participate in facilitated circles that build confidence, cultural pride, and peer support.
- **Storytelling & Narrative Change:** Year-round writing workshops, public speaking training, and digital media production (including podcasts and digital stories) amplify the voices of women and girls of color, challenging stereotypes and promoting inclusivity.
- **Healing Retreats & Wellness Summits:** Annual and bi-annual retreats offer trauma-informed wellness, yoga, meditation, and restorative justice, fostering connection and empowerment in healing environments in the U.S. and internationally.
Example: Costa Rica healing retreats bring together women from across the Americas for immersive, culturally-rooted wellness experiences.
- **Global Convening & Coalition Building:** Annual summits and regular convenings unite women, girls, and mentors from multiple countries for learning, healing, and network-building, with virtual access for global participation.

From SCHEMES to CIRCLE: Our Evolving Framework

The GOC Collective Inc.'s journey began with an institutional governmental **SCHEMES** framework that is a living system grounded in:

- Storytelling
- Culture
- Healing
- Empowerment
- Mentorship
- Equity
- Sustainability

We intentionally reclaimed a word that had long been used to criminalize the strategic brilliance of Black and Brown youth, transforming it into a blueprint for ecosystemic change. SCHEMES shaped our early identity and underpinned the model that secured our 501(c)(3) status.

As our circles widened and partnerships deepened, our work evolved. Today, we honor SCHEMES as our foundation and beginner's path. Building on that, we now embrace a new name for our public-facing model: **CIRCLE**.

CIRCLE stands for:

- Culture
- Intergenerational
- Regeneration
- Community
- Leadership
- Equity

CIRCLE reflects the regenerative, interconnected nature of our approach and signals our commitment to building ecosystems of care rooted in ancestral knowledge and collective power. Documenting this evolution not only fosters internal clarity but also contributes to a broader fieldwide learning process—one that affirms adaptation as a strength, not a departure from integrity.

What's Blooming: Early Impacts

The GOC Collective's healing-centered model is creating a measurable impact—strengthening cultural pride, connection, and resilience. Through retreats, partnerships, and alumni networks, it's building a lasting foundation for generational leadership. Organizational outcomes were assessed using sign-in sheets and anonymized, post-program surveys distributed to all participants after each retreat and again three months later. The surveys included both quantitative Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. Our team analyzed the data through descriptive means, and all participants provided informed consent for their feedback to be used in program evaluation and reporting.

- **97% of participants** report significant improvements in cultural pride, connection, and resilience.
- **Over 45 community facilitators have been trained** in culturally grounded mentorship and leadership approaches, sustaining localized healing circles.
- **International healing retreats** in Costa Rica and the U.S. have led participants to report lasting transformation, with renewed clarity and purpose in their personal and professional lives.

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- **Developed partnerships** with an international education retreat center, two schools, and two national mentoring organizations.
- **Launched alumni and peer networks** for ongoing leadership development.
- **Initiated a digital newsletter** reaching over 250 community members.

In Constellation with Others

The GOC Collective Inc. is not walking this path alone. It belongs to a powerful constellation of global movements led by women and Indigenous communities who are reclaiming their stories,

restoring cultural practices, and envisioning new systems of care. These movements transcend borders and generations, rooted in ancestral memory and powered by a collective refusal to be erased. Their rhythm of resistance and regeneration not only inspires but also strengthens and affirms our work. Together, we demonstrate what becomes possible when healing, sovereignty, and solidarity are at the center.

Over the past two decades, Indigenous women have emerged as prominent leaders, beginning in local contexts and now increasingly at regional, national, and international levels. Their fluency in rights-based discourse has allowed them to advocate effectively in diverse arenas, bridging grassroots experience with global policy (Kuokkanen, 2012). As they organize for land, cultural survival, and self-determination, they are catalyzing a growing wave of collective transformation. This momentum shapes our vision and affirms that when those most impacted lead, change is not only possible—it is already in motion.

Aligned efforts include:

- Black Girls Defense Fund (U.S. South): Racial and gender justice advocacy.
- Caribbean Feminist Climate Justice Movement (Jamaica): Feminism-centered climate activism.
- Mama Cash Spark Fund (Netherlands): Supporting grassroots feminist organizing.
- Indigenous wellness centers featured in the Social Innovation Journal’s “Unseen Powerhouses” edition (Social Innovation Journal, 2025).

These partnerships amplify our collective impact and reflect a meaningful shift toward equitable investment in culturally grounded leadership and innovation.

We offer this reflection as both witnesses and participants in a global shift—one in which women of color and Indigenous leaders are not just responding to inequity but also architecting new blueprints for justice, care, and sustainability. Our alignment with these movements is not coincidental; it is intentional and necessary. Together, we form an ecosystem of resistance and renewal, where shared values, cultural resilience, and transnational solidarity become the building blocks for a liberated future. As our constellation expands, so does our collective capacity to dream, disrupt, and deliver new realities rooted in memory, shaped by community, and guided by those most impacted.

Growing like a Forest, Not a Franchise: Our Vision Ahead

Achieving this vision will require a sustained commitment to relationship-building, narrative change, and ecosystemic thinking. We are not simply replicating a program—we are cultivating place-based strategies that respond to the unique cultural, historical, and political contexts of each community. This means investing time in building trust, honoring local leadership, and allowing each site to grow at its own pace and according to its unique needs. Rather than scaling through standardization, we scale through solidarity—expanding not by uniformity but by resonance. Our model prioritizes depth over speed, rooting each expansion in the values of cultural humility, interdependence, and long-term stewardship.

Our vision is ambitious yet deeply rooted in cultural authenticity:

- **Regional Expansion:** Expand the GOC model into five additional high-need global communities by 2028, creating scalable hubs of healing, mentorship, and leadership.
- **Leader Cultivation:** Train and empower over 500 women and girls as community facilitators, mentors, and cultural stewards by 2028.
- **Cultural Preservation:** Launch a comprehensive digital archive and oral history initiative to preserve and disseminate endangered cultural knowledge globally.

To realize this vision, we seek committed international partners and investors who share our values of equity, cultural sovereignty, and regenerative leadership.

This next chapter requires more than funding—it calls for aligned stewardship. We invite collaborators who are not only resource providers but also co-conspirators in liberation, willing to challenge extractive systems and invest in culturally grounded futures. Whether through shared learning exchanges, intergenerational fellowships, or co-designed community labs, we are building infrastructures that reflect the wisdom of forests: decentralized, resilient, and rooted in mutual flourishing. By walking with us, partners become part of a living movement that centers healing as strategy and culture as infrastructure.

Proof in Practice: What the Stories and Numbers Tell Us

In 2024 and 2025, the GOC supported over 200 program staff in training and community outreach and partnered with Costa Rican leaders for cultural exchange. Participants reported:

- Increased cultural pride
- Strengthened intergenerational trust
- Reduced burnout
- A renewed sense of belonging

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These outcomes are more than anecdotal; they are early indicators of a healing-centered approach that works. When women and girls of color are given space to reconnect with their cultural roots, engage in reciprocal learning, and be witnessed in their full humanity, transformation follows. The qualitative shifts reported across identity, relationships, and emotional well-being reflect the power of culturally responsive ecosystems. As we continue to gather stories and data, we are committed to expanding our learning agenda to include rigorous evaluation methods rooted in equity, co-creation, and community-defined success.

An Expansive Call to Action: Co-Creating New Cultural Infrastructure

Our call is not simply a call for financial support. It is a generational invitation to join a living movement of cultural reweaving and collective care. This is how we build what has never been built before—not through extraction or replication, but through reciprocity and relationship.

Cultural infrastructure is not made of concrete and steel; it is woven through story, care, and shared commitment. We are calling in those who view themselves as stewards of justice, cultural memory, and collective thriving. Consider this an invitation to step into a deeper rhythm—one rooted in ancestral wisdom and reaching toward liberated futures. Co-creation begins not with answers but with presence, listening, and a willingness to build the unknown together.

What Does It Mean to Co-Create?

- **Join as Partners, Not Patrons:** Step into the circle as collaborators—bringing your wisdom, networks, creativity, and presence, not just resources.
- **Design and Build Together:** Participate in co-designing programs, spaces, and practices that reflect the lived realities and aspirations of women and girls of color.
- **Honor Ancestral Knowledge:** Integrate storytelling, ritual, plant medicine, and communal healing as vital forms of leadership and innovation.
- **Foster Collective Learning:** Engage in ongoing dialogue, reflection, and adaptive learning, recognizing that cultural infrastructure is dynamic and evolving.
- **Cultivate Sustainability:** Commit to long-term relationship-building, capacity sharing, and intergenerational leadership, ensuring the work endures beyond any single initiative.

Co-creation is not theoretical—it is tactile, relational, and rooted in mutual exchange. It asks us to move beyond performative allyship and into embodied participation. This work flourishes through consistent, values-aligned actions that honor lived experience and redistribute power. Whether you are a healer, artist, scholar, organizer, or funder, there is a role for you in this ecosystem. Below are just a few ways to step in with intention and humility.

Concrete Ways to Co-Create

- Serve as mentors, facilitators, or advisors in healing circles and storytelling initiatives.
- Contribute experiences, histories, and creative expressions to digital archives and oral history projects.
- Mobilize platforms and networks to amplify narratives of thriving, resilience, and cultural sovereignty.
- Offer skills, spaces, technology, or in-kind support that strengthens the ecosystem's foundation.
- Convene cross-sector gatherings, foster coalitions, and bridge communities across geographies and generations.

Closing Reflection

The future isn't waiting; the very girls the world tried to forget are singing the future into being. Underfunded doesn't mean unworthy. Unseen doesn't mean inactive. We are the storm and the seed: the blueprint and the bloom. Invest accordingly. We carry forward a legacy of resilience not as a burden, but as a blueprint for the future. The voices rising in our circles are not echoes, but they are origin stories in motion. To invest in this work is to believe in futures already seeded, in brilliance long obscured, and in the power of girls and women of color to shape a

world more just, more beautiful, and more whole. Let this be the moment we stop asking if they are ready and start asking if we are prepared to follow their lead.

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