On believing what's possible within yourself

Magician, philanthropist, and speaker Nicole Cardoza discusses the power of creating for your community and the meaning of Black Girl Magic.

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As told to Maryam Said, 3038 words.

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Being Black and learning a lot about African magic growing up, I've always been fascinated by magic. I never got to see myself on the screen and let alone Black magicians. When I think about it, how Harry Potter is celebrated in terms of being a wizard and then you think about women, you think about the word "witch." It has such a negative connotation. I was wondering what your thoughts on that are, especially being a magician yourself?

Magic is absolutely gendered because historically, stage magic has benefited conversations around colonization and oppression. It's really helped to stoke some type of fear or hesitation around marginalized communities and the spiritual practices that they were known for, which is why you see magicians capturing and conquering the "Magic of the Orient" and role-playing white male magicians would oftentimes role play to look like they were more exotic Black male magicians too during that time, to be honest.

But there weren't that many of us anyway, so yeah, so I think stage magic to me is the practice of possibility and reimagining. It gives us a space to play with the realms of reality and what we think is possible in a very tactical way. You go to a magic show, if you see a card, be able to move through time or coins be able to move through space, that can be the platform of, well, what else is possible at this moment?

Totally.

But it has been something that's felt very restrictive to a certain subgroup of people. Historically, audiences have been proportionately white, and of course, magicians themselves have been overarching white men. Stage magic is not the only place where we've placed men as the magic makers in our society. We see that with superheroes. We even saw them in Harry Potter, as you saw, there's so much gender. There could be a really interesting gender conversation around Harry Potter. I think that it got a lot of attention to have Hermione as one of the lead characters, but how rare that is and how limited her role was compared to Ron and Harry is a whole other thing. But she was almost like the magical negro of that whole thing, even though she wasn't Black but different.

How did you get into doing Stage Magic?

I've always loved stage magic ever since I was a kid. One day, in my 20s, when I started practicing, the reason why is because I was looking for magic shows to go to and I wanted to go see people that looked like me, and it didn't even question that I wouldn't find me. I was like, "Oh, I'll just go see." Obviously, I want to see a woman, I want to see a Black woman. I want to see Black people. And I'm sitting here Googling, Googling, and I'm not finding much coming up for shows. I don't know, maybe a couple of dozen Black magicians in the United States. I'm still the only Black woman that I've met that's performing right now. I know a lot of Black women that want to get into magic, which is amazing. But I'm the first to perform as a Black woman at many of the magic institutions

in 2024. So that says a lot about this history.

So, yeah, I got into it because I'm like, surely that can't be the case. As I was Googling, I started to find, instead of the Black girl performing in my city that weekend, I found stories about Black magicians throughout history I'd never heard of before. I started to read about how magic comes up for us for Black people as Hoodoo. And I was reading, oh my gosh, there's so many different analogies between stage magic and Hoodoo and other spiritual practices. That can't be a coincidence. Well, it turns out it's not. A lot of the practices that we know in stage magic were informed by spiritual practices done by communities of color that are not reflected on the stage. And so, I came into magic because of that.

How is so much of my history and many other people influencing stage magic, but we're not on stage? We've had so many more conversations about diversifying different art forms and I haven't seen as many in magic. So why is magic somehow this one space where we're not agitating? And then for me, like I was telling you, magic is such a powerful art form. It's one of the few things that requires us to be fully present.

If you're sitting on your phone during my magic show, blink and you miss it, right? So how incredible it is to have a group of people that actively engaged in the world where our phones are at our fingertips. We watch a video for three seconds and then decide we don't want to see it anymore. We're swiping through on TikTok, watching dozens of videos in an hour. That's a gift. And to have that platform we can do so much with it, you know what I mean?

I could make a rabbit disappear and reappear between the start of that conversation and the end. I could tell you anything. I could tell you the number of trans women that have been killed in the country in 2023. I could tell you why it's so important for us to be rallying against the end of a genocide, or I could just pull a rabbit out of a hat. I think that when you're in a space where you're allowing yourself to suspend disbelief, where we're all grownups sitting here believing in magic, that is a powerful place. So what can we use that space for? What conversations should we be holding and how can we hold ourselves accountable to encouraging our audiences to think about more than just the trick, but what's possible because of it, right? What's possible when we allow ourselves to suspend disbelief?

That's how I oriented, that's how I got into it. It was not just to do magic tricks, but to use this space as a platform for connection and conversation. I'm obviously a Black woman, so if I don't feel good at my own shows and then we've got a problem. I speak from my own experience and I really want to hold space for us because we have disproportionately not been given space to dream, to imagine, to believe, to suspend disbelief, and be able to believe in the best possible outcome. So many marginalized people are wired to always expect the worst. And so, how freeing is it to be able to go and be like, "Car disappeared. What's going to happen?"

And also, being really clear on not just gender parity between men and women, but also dismantling the gender binary—we're far away. The magic industry is in the '40s in terms of social and civil stuff. So, for me, since I've started, I haven't really invested a lot of time there because that's just not where I want validation from my work. I've been able to work with so many incredible teachers and mentors in the much more traditional space who have been incredible, not just with working with me, but championing justice and equity in the space.

My experience has been what I've made of it, which I'm deeply grateful for, and that stems from a lot of privilege that I have my own studio, that I'm a philanthropist, I'm well connected. I've been a public speaker for over a decade. I have connections to conferences and venues, and I can afford to take an investment into what I want to do versus the gigs that pay bills. So, really rooted in privilege there, but also I've been an entrepreneur for over a decade. I've had to start stuff a lot and engage in systems that haven't served me. And so, this time around I was just like, "I'm not doing that."

Your funding project *Reclamation Ventures* where you invest in marginalized folks who want to start any sort of project. How has that been and what has the process been like that for you?

I really believe in reclaiming and re-imagining the spaces where we can thrive. We, as people that are working in spaces where we might not be seen, heard, or celebrated. Obviously, Black, queer communities, people that are

adjacent to me and where I can show up most authentically. And so, I think my magic, my philanthropic work, the companies I have under my portfolio, they all reflect that same thing. Even if the anti-racism daily or audience is white people, our white cishet people are unaware, but how is that work hopefully going to change conditions for us and for our communities? How is giving money directly to people doing this work going to obviously directly change them? And then how can my show hold space and change the conditions for us to feel seen in the audience? And with the magic kit, hopefully for our kids, the next generation will see themselves as magicians. I think it takes more than just modeling it ourselves, but paving the way and trying to minimize the barriers to outcomes, to access an opportunity.

I think you're doing great work. About the magic kit, which you recently posted about, what was it like bringing that together?

Well, the magic kit is what we're launching on Kickstarter. Most magicians, when they get interviewed about how they got into magic, it's because they got a magic kit when they were a kid. But if you Google magic kits and you look at them, a lot of them have pictures of little white boys on them. And, if they don't, they are marketed in ad campaigns with white boys. Most magic workshops are marketed to boys. And then, when you're buying these things in toy stores, at least you would be, when you were my age, I'm 34, Toys R Us was king. Those magic kids would be in the boys' aisle. And even now, we still have some pretty gender toy aisles.

There is so much power and potential for kids to be able to stand and be recognized for being magical as stage magicians. I think that is a beautiful allegory for the lack of opportunities that so many kids get to be celebrated as such in what we see in the magic industry.

That's my long-winded way of saying I thought it would be really cool to create a magic kit. It's got two parts. You obviously see the picture of the physical kit, but there's also an app where they'll learn magic tricks from me and other magicians, and I've been intentional about building a team of instructors that reflect a wide range of magicians that you wouldn't know about.

I'm not the only woman magician. I'm certainly not the only marginalized magician, but those magicians disproportionately are not in the news. They're not in the spotlight. They're not getting the access and opportunity that white male magicians do. So, kids probably don't even see themselves like I did. I didn't see myself as a magician. I loved magic when I was a kid, but I never considered being a magician. I knew I didn't want to be a magician's assistant because I didn't like to wear dresses, but that's wild and we can't have that 30 years later.

Are there artists or magicians that you look up to as well? I think you may have touched on it previously.

I think Ellen Armstrong was the first Black female magician to tour the country with her own solo show. She performed in the '40s and the '60s. I'm the second. And so, there are not that many that I can really look up to. I love her life and legacy. I never saw her perform, so I don't know. But I am really more inspired by people that are re-imagining or redefining our relationship with different ideas. I think about Trisha Hershey and how she's our relationship as Black women with rest, for example. That is deeply inspiring to me. I look at artists like Kehinde Wiley, fine artists like Karri Turner, people that are taking pieces of what we've been told is one way, and then inserting ourselves in that narrative and re-imagining ourselves at the center of those conversations.

That's where I get more of my inspiration from these days. I want to make sure I'm reimagining our relationship to Black girl magic in a way that feels very tangible and real and not rooted in us doing accomplishments in the context of whiteness, but us recognizing and honoring the magic that we inherently hold. That is my show. That's what I want to do. I want my audience to walk away feeling magical.

I think with magic and specifically being Black and being raised in a religious household and how we have these ideas around the term "magic", and especially in the Black community, it's not always so positive, I think it's really refreshing, like you said, that you are reclaiming and knowing that it is really rooted in our cultures and our histories. It's rooted in healing, it's rooted in connection.

The first part about reclaiming our relationship to it as Black people. A lot of the reason there's a stigma against Black spiritual practices or healing work that we would do as Black communities is not because we as Black people chose that, but because of whiteness and white people limiting us. So, as much as stage magic has grown and magic with a "CK" has grown, it has come at the expense of us as a dominant culture in the United States and in other Western countries actually enforcing, penalizing and exploiting what matters to us.

I think part of reclaiming our relationship to magic is allowing ourselves to see ourselves as such, because we are inherently magic. I think that despite the fact that we might not be on stage, we know how to dream. We know how to reimagine what's possible.

We know how to suspend disbelief because as Black people and so many other marginalized people that have experienced so much pain in the society that we live in, that's all we've had is the ability to suspend disbelief from the horrors that have been inflicted upon us to imagine that we can be here and that our children and our generations that follow could be here. So, if our ancestors weren't magicians, I wouldn't be able to practice stage magic today.

I think it's that re-imagining that, for sure, especially for women, especially for gender expansive individuals, too. You talked about the wizard and witch, that's a real thing. It was reinforced at the expense of witches. And so, absolutely.

And a lot of these practices for Black people and other non-white communities were women doing the work. It is a very intentional thing that women have been excluded from stage magic and been the assistant and treated as such, you know what I mean? And also, hyper feminized.

I know that you said that you are the only Black woman magician now, but I do hope to see that there's more and that there is a collective and a growth and a place where Black women just can flourish and be any shape and take any shape in any form.

I'm going to start doing workshops for grownups because one, I start doing them for kids, and the parents are like, especially because a lot of people will bring their kids who are Black, right?

Yeah.

Or a lot of parents who have kids of color who are girls or identify as girls, but the parents are sitting there, the Black and Brown parents are sitting there, "Wait, what was that again? Can you show me that?"

If I can build a community where people can learn magic and engage in magic and feel more comfortable expressing their magic, then that's what matters. It's not about getting people really, even with this kit, it's not about getting these kids to be the next major magician in the world. It's about getting them to feel more confident, becoming magic, and allowing themselves to be seen as magic. It takes a lot to walk up to somebody and say, "I want to show you something magical." It doesn't matter if that's stage magic or not. And so, this is just a platform for the potential and the possibility of allowing your magic to shine.

There's such beauty when you're seeing someone in awe of a magic trick. It's so fun.

My shows are really interactive for that reason. At first, we're all kind of afraid to be in the audience, to be engaged, to start pulling people up from different places. They start sharing their stories. I ask everybody to share what makes them magical when they're in my show. And so, at the end of my shows, when I'm walking around saying thank you, and people are coming up, I hear people talking about what makes them magical to other people, or talking about that time where they saw magic when they were a kid, because I talk about being a kid a lot.

It's beautiful that people are walking out of these shows, tapping into themselves or talking about, "Ooh, I think I'm magical because I'm really resilient." "Well, tell me more about that. What made you resilient?" It's like, "Oomph."

A lot of magic is believing what’s possible within your own two hands.

Nicole Cardoza Recommends:

The art of Khari Turner

Belonging: A Culture of Place by bell hooks

For Magicians Who Die on Stage by jzl jms

The Creative Act by Rick Rubin

When Things Fall Apart by Pema Chödrön

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