Book Review
The Feminist Trailblazer of Black Philanthropy
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in low-income neighborhoods, as well as sustained professional learning communities. But he fails to call out the inability of computers to teach—to communicate with complexity and solve the messy, human problems.

Reich proposes systemic changes that are big enough to drive a major culture shift in education. But he does not provide practical steps forward for individuals committed to the educational enterprise. The lack of practical steps, combined with the oversight regarding the centrality of teachers, leaves a gap between theory and action. Despite asserting this point in his prologue, he doesn’t reinforce it in the book. Computers can’t teach. Only people can. Consequently, readers are left wondering what they can do to address the insufficiencies of remote learning technologies—all too crucial during the seemingly interminable COVID-19 pandemic.

**The Feminist Trailblazer of Black Philanthropy**

A new biography of Madam C. J. Walker shows how America’s first self-made female millionaire and Black entrepreneur put philanthropy at the center of her business and life.

**BY MARYANN REID**

Tyrone McKinley Freeman’s biography of Black entrepreneur and philanthropist Madam C. J. Walker arrives at a time when the philanthropic sector is finally addressing its lack of racial diversity and inclusion. This awareness has galvanized the sector, notably with the recent increased media visibility of prominent Black philanthropists like Robert F. Smith and events like Black Philanthropy Month, which broke records in giving and growth this year amid a global health pandemic.

In Madam C. J. Walker’s Gospel of Giving: Black Women’s Philanthropy during Jim Crow, Freeman expands the traditional definition of philanthropy—“voluntary action for the public good”—from his and his colleagues’ work at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy to argue that Black giving is as extensive and historical as white giving. The mission of racial uplift—central to Walker’s philanthropy—including both monetary and nmonetary forms of giving, from time and food to education and employment to spiritual guidance. By upending this traditional understanding of philanthropy, Freeman interrogates the belief “that African Americans were mostly recipients of philanthropy by whites and not agents of it themselves”—that “they have a tradition of being helped but not a tradition of helping.”

Walker’s life is exemplary of this inclusive philanthropy: Walker, born Sarah Breedlove (she took the name of her third husband, Charles Joseph Walker, when they married in 1906), began working as a washerwoman when she was just a child. Married and widowed with a young daughter by the age of 20, she migrated throughout the region for work, arriving in St. Louis, Missouri, circa 1889, with only $2. Walker and her daughter found refuge with the local African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church and were supported in particular by the network of Black women who ran its social services, connecting Walker to the St. Louis Colored Orphans Home, which cared for and educated her daughter while she worked as a washerwoman.

“The home’s support was tremendously helpful to [Walker] and gave her a firsthand view of the power of the self-help ethos among Black people to address community needs despite the widespread neglect and exclusion by the dominant white social service providers and larger society,” Freeman writes. “The church, the orphans’ home, and the Court of Calanthe [a Black charitable organization] had all given her access and exposure to new friends, new resources, and new ways of being from her close proximity to—even from the tutelage of—Black women who were educated, had social standing, and were very involved in the local community.”

From these Black church women, Walker learned firsthand the power of Black women as givers in the broad philanthropic sense of giving—what Freeman refers to as Walker’s “gospel of giving.” This gospel, or way of life, Freeman observes, consists of three tenets:

“(1) give as you can to be helpful to others, (2)
sparer no useful means that may be helpful to others, and (3) give more as your means increase to help others.”

It was through her cosmetics manufacturing business, the Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company (the Walker Company), founded in 1910, that she was able to carry out the second and third tenets of her philanthropy. Earlier in the decade, Walker had worked for Annie Turnbo, a Black female entrepreneur who sold hair treatment products for damaged Black hair—Walker herself suffered from hair loss. In her dramatic retelling of her business’ origins, Walker claimed to have had a divine vision in which a “Black woman appeared to [her] and told [her] what to mix for [her] hair.” Traveling around selling her—and not Turnbo’s—products, Walker launched her business.

Walker created an “ethnic niche economy” by building a company that not only filled a much-needed gap in the supply market but also launched the “Black beauty culture” industry. According to Freeman, this culture emerged from racial segregation as well as Black women’s “unique cultural attributes (e.g., hairdressing needs) that were difficult for white merchants to understand.” Walker created a space for Black women to identify as both workers and consumers with culturally specific needs of their own.

Inside her company, Walker organized clubs for Black women to gather together around shared experiences, from career to family. These women took advantage of what Walker offered and, in turn, gave back to their own communities as donors—not just as wage-earning women—which renewed their confidence and self-worth. “Through her philanthropy,” Freeman writes, “[Walker] connected working-class Black women to each other through associationalism to bond and leverage their collective power in support of a better quality of life for themselves, their families, and their communities.”

Freeman details Walker’s strategy of giving. She learned from her washerwoman days how employment could provide the “pathway for Black women to autonomy and pride” without subjecting them to abuse by white employers. Order and alignment also were important to Walker, evident in her hiring of lawyer Freeman B. Ransom as her advisor.

Further, she used her giving to develop relationships with prominent Black civil rights leaders like A. Philip Randolph, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey. Freeman reveals that Ransom expressed reservations about Walker engaging with these highly visible Black leaders and subsequently becoming a government target. Yet Walker believed that giving to the many causes connected to the Black civil rights movement could secure her a more significant place in the male-dominated movement.

One major area for Walker’s giving was education, particularly industrial education, which had been largely funded by white people with the intent of confining Black people to manual labor. White philanthropists in the North and South, according to Freeman, “believed industrial education was the best method for preserving the racial hierarchy and social order of the South.” It produced unlicensed workers that helped to uphold white comfort and status. Walker worked within the system’s limits to create Walker schools inside industrial colleges that produced credentialed workers and then hired them. In effect, Freeman asserts, Walker doubled her giving by providing a job “in a discriminatory labor market” and, through this employment opportunity, by fostering the dignity that came with supporting oneself.

While Freeman ties the strings of Walker’s life together to illustrate the vast and monumental approach of her giving, additional historical and gender contexts about Black and white giving would have painted a richer story of Walker’s innovative and extraordinary life and impact.

According to Freeman, one major difference between Black and white giving was culturally based, with white Western models seeing giving as “philanthropic only when given to strangers.” This sharply contrasts with Black giving, which, Freeman explains, was based on a shared consciousness of American racism where “little distinction exists between gifts to family, friends, and others”—an approach that Walker embodied.

Freeman examines how Walker navigated the constraints of Jim Crow to move somewhat freely between Black and white circles, although he leaves the reader wondering how she remained safe doing so. He suggests that Walker may have been inspired by America’s leading white male philanthropists, including her contemporaries Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. He also mentions that these philanthropists were aware of Walker’s giving, and there are occasions where she appeared in photos with them—*Gospel of Giving* includes photos of Walker posing with white male philanthropists as well as snapshots of her name listed on the same donor roll as theirs. This is notable, considering that the names of these philanthropists’ wives were prohibited from being included on those very donor rolls.

Walker’s alliances with male philanthropists raise the question of whether she had any significant professional relationships with white female philanthropists—or if this type of alliance was even possible. According to Freeman, white women had limits imposed on their giving by their husbands, from whom they inherited wealth and then “stepped[ed] into philanthropy after the patriarch’s death.” Black women did not have the “protections of the household nor the conditions that allowed them choice about labor force participation.” This is mostly because many Black men struggled to find and keep a
A trio of new books highlighted online discuss critical issues and cross-sector advancements that can inspire social change. One proposes a new model of capitalism, another examines comedy as a tool for participatory democracy, and a third offers managerial lessons from value investing. Read excerpts of these books at ssir.org/books/excerpts.

**Accountable: The Rise of Citizen Capitalism**, by veteran investors Michael O’Leary and Warren Valdmanis, is a moral indictment of contemporary capitalism—with responsibility firmly placed on the shoulders of corporate giants. The coauthors, who launched Bain Capital’s social impact fund, put forth the new economic model of “citizen capitalism,” whereby all stakeholders—buyers, workers, voters, and investors—hold corporations accountable to the bottom line not of profit but of value to ensure prosperity for everyone. (Harper Business, 2020)

**A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice** examines how comedy is both a significant communication tool and a cultural strategy for public engagement on social justice issues. Media and communications scholars Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman present case studies, research, and interviews with social justice advocates and comedians to argue that media and technological disruption have created the ideal conditions for radical comedy to effect social change. (University of California Press, 2020)

**Creating Strategic Value** analyzes how diverse methods of value investing can be applied to the corporate world in *Creating Strategic Value: Applying Value Investing Principles to Corporate Management*. A fellow of the Gabelli Center for Global Security Analysis at Fordham University, Calandro proposes a theory for value investing based on a set of general principles—such as how the margin-of-safety principle can be applied to corporate strategy in areas beyond stocks and bonds—applicable to management. (Columbia Business School Publishing, 2020)