

# In Conversation: Storming the Weather

Phanuel Antwi & Junie Désil with Benedicta Bawo  
& Maysa Zeyad

In the aftermath of the public, viral, and extrajudicial killing of George Floyd, many Black frontline workers and others in the support and caring profession gathered over several months in Zoom sessions facilitated by a local Black registered counsellor. During these virtual meetings, the particular issues Black residents and Black staff working the frontlines in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood of Vancouver face became more apparent. We were all weathering repeated exposures to adversity, racism, and marginalization and getting by, often in isolation.

At various times during my off-and-on work in the DTES, various Black folks have met to discuss the issues of anti-Black racism that persist, from the lack of access to culturally appropriate body and hair care to the lengths Black frontline staff must go to ensure Black members of the community experience care, safety, and support. As part of this process to initiate dialogue, Phanuel Antwi and I interviewed Benedicta Bawo and Maysa Zeyad about their experiences serving populations made vulnerable through the interlocking systems and structures of settler colonialism, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and misogyny (to name a few), focusing on the weather as metaphor. The interview has been edited for length and clarity, and the name of the organization has been omitted for the safety and privacy of its staff.

— *Junie Désil*

**Maysa Zeyad** My name is Maysa. I came here ten years ago from Yemen. My dad is from Yemen and my mom is from Somalia. When I first came here the first thing I had to adjust to, unfortunately, was subtle racism. This was very interesting for me to experience because, back home, it was open racism. So that subtle racism is what I currently want to change at the place that I work, where I am at. I work at our organization and I support women—if they're willing to let me do that.

**Phanuel Antwi** Can we hear a little bit about the kind of work you do that is often taking your cue from the people who come to you for support as opposed to imposing support onto them?

**MZ** So for me, I feel like it's if somebody tells me to do the dishes, I know I need to do the dishes, I know that it's best for me to do my dishes, but if somebody is constantly telling me to do my dishes, then I'm going to say, no, I'm not going to do them. But if I know that I need to do it, I'll go and do it at my own pace. That's how I relate it to my work. I don't want to impose my support on anybody, when maybe they don't want my support, maybe they don't need it at the moment. And who am I to go and tell them: "You need to do this; you need to listen because I'm a housing worker." I cannot tell them: "Oh, sleeping on the street, that's not the best for you, let me support you, find you housing." Maybe they're not at that stage yet. If I come and force support on them and eventually, they do what I want them to do, then it's taking the power from them, and that's not the work I want to do. I want to empower women; I want to give them their power back.

**Benedicta Bawo** I wanted to touch on what Maysa said, because there's something that happened a few days back. There was this woman who didn't want to work with me, and she said she wanted to work with someone who spoke English—English she could understand. It hurt me [laughs]. It did hurt a little. It was like, "what does this woman need, and how can we get this woman to the point where she will get what she needs, even if that support does not look like me or isn't me?" Support comes in different ways, and it's definitely up to the person to receive it or reject it. To choose what support would mean to her.

**Junie Désil** What I'm also hearing is that there's this particular space occupied by Black people and racialized people where people don't want our help or support. How do we navigate that?

**BB** I think it's a journey, it's a process for me. When I first started working at the centre, I would get one or two racist remarks, and I felt like I'd gotten to the point where

it wouldn't faze me anymore. There would be a break, and then something would happen again, and then it did annoy me, and I was like, maybe I'm not over this thing, maybe I'm truly human. But I don't think anybody has the answer to that, because I find that people here, and this is just my experience, people here are used to Canadian things; Canadian and American accents, whatever that means to them. I'm still learning on my journey, trying to not be offended while still providing support.

**MZ** For me, I always have my boundaries. There's a difference when somebody comes in with curiosity and when somebody is either mocking the accent or not willing to work with me because I'm a different race from what they were used to working with, or if they feel a bit threatened. And that's an actual example of something that did happen with me, with a client that said they felt threatened. And I asked them — because at the end of the day, it's not all about me — I asked them what made them feel threatened by me, and it was related to somebody else who resembled me and had hurt them in the past. I asked them, “do you feel comfortable if I leave the door open; do you feel comfortable if we talk outside in a coffee shop where there's a lot of people around.” Slowly, I started seeing a big difference. They started asking about my culture and showing interest.

**BB** In regards to that, sometimes I think it's patience, which not everybody has. You should be, you're encouraged to be, but it just takes time. It's a dicey situation because some people never come around. They never get to the point where they give you the space to really be yourself or give you room or understand or see the world from your point of view. Some people never get to that point. I know I have a hard time drawing boundaries, like, “OK, we're on different pages now, maybe I'll take a step back, you take your step.” I still have some issues drawing that line.

**PA** Both of you have pointed to the fact that patience is required with this kind of work, with the examples that you've given. You've got the pace of your clients, your own pace of being there, and then the pace of the institution. Oftentimes they are not aligned. I want to hear a bit about what it means: the pace of change and also the pace of work in the place that works at a different pace.

**BB** For me, my pace is the most important. I try to stay grounded in my body with what I want, what I need, and what I can give in a particular time. And this often changes, you know, sometimes it's this way, other times it's that way. I try to adapt too. One thing I know I could always depend on is how I'm feeling in my body. I've

realized—just bringing it back to the pace of the organization—people come, and people go, but I can't come and leave my body. I just have to take care of that part first. The second thing I also watch out for is the pace of the client. I try to be very flexible and very grounded.

**MZ** In certain situations, I don't want to take full control, I don't want to be the driver of the car. I give that ability to my clients, leave the ball in their court, and whatever they want to do first, I will support them with that. That's an ideal world, but in reality, it's me forgetting to take my break. It's me thinking about them on my days off and coming to work and calling them right now like, "oh, how did this go, do you want my support, do you want me to accompany you?" And I realize that, I'm forgetting about me. If I sink, who's going to pull me out? So, first I have to take a minute, take a breather, and ask them, like, how did it go? Did you try this? Give them that ability to go at their pace first, if that makes sense.

**JD** If you think of our workplace as a weather system, what does that look like for you?

**MZ** It's frustrating. It's very frustrating because within the organization itself, the mandate is very different from what we're practicing. We're offering to be anti-oppressive to the women, not being judgmental, being very understanding and not having that white savior complex while we're working. But as staff, we're not being taken care of, as women we're not being taken care of. As women with our own traumas, we're not being taken care of. Being a Black woman, coming from a different walk of life, not being appreciated or taken very seriously when we raise our concerns, that's very frustrating. If we're not implementing that work within, and for the women that work for this organization—the pillars—then how are we supposed to reflect that on our clients?

**BB** Most of our clients are racialized folks and Indigenous people too. It affects them. We are not being fed, so we can't feed them. I'm choosing to use "fed," but there's nothing to give because we haven't really been given anything. It's hard to reconcile idealism with realism because of what's going on right now. People have been complaining for years and years and years and years, and it feels like it's been falling on deaf ears. The front-line workers are mostly racialized staff, too. As it goes higher up, you know, you see a good number of white people, so it begs the question, who are you really serving and what's our mandate here? Just to add to what Maysa said, I feel like with the new managers, the staff has been given the opportunity to breathe a little. Before we

couldn't breathe because it was just, "go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go." You have things to do all the time. You have like forty, fifty clients. You just have so much to do, so you're rarely thinking about yourself. Now we have the opportunity to just breathe, get in touch with how we are feeling, our anxiety, and our triggers—just getting to reflect on different things that will make us more effective in our roles and in serving the women who come here for support.

**MZ** The other thing I know is that when this organization was started, there were seven staff members, and I know at that time there was not much of a Black community within the DTES. Looking back a little bit at the history, at what happened with Hogan's Alley, we see the effects of displacement and also how now everything's changing. We see a lot of Black people coming in, moving especially to the East Side, and yet the organizations are not giving Black People space, not doing anything special for Black History Month. We see conflict. A client comes in and they're like, "oh, you Black bitch, go back to your country, you're a terrorist." These comments come out because the Black community is not being engaged and we're not acknowledging that Black people have historically lived and are now returning again to the East Side.

**BB** I have worked at this organization for a while and I am not aware of what resources are available for Black folks. It's like we're left hanging. Sometimes when I have Black clients, Black women come to meet me and they're like: "I want this, I need that, I want this support." And I'm like: OK, well, join the waitlists. And it hurts to say that. But that's all I have.

**JD** Imagine not being able to provide something as basic as hair conditioner for Black women accessing our services. We have to ask our Black friends if they have any Black beauty products, and stash some away for the next time or the next client who will need these.

**MZ** Here's an example. I had a client, and she is from the same country as I am, from Somalia, and she was saying: "My hair is being damaged because the shampoo that I've been given, it's not adequate with my hair. But the staff don't get it; they're like, you get what you get." So she found the whole experience very frustrating, and finally she exploded and then the staff wondered, "oh, why did she explode like that?"

**PA** Can we speak a little bit about how as Black women in this space, you are finding ways to breathe, to feed yourselves, and feed others?

**BB** For me I think it's a bit of conditioning. I am from Nigeria, and back home in Nigeria, struggle is appreciated. Suffering is appreciated. If you don't work so hard, you don't get anything. And even when you work so hard and get chicken change, you should appreciate the chicken change because there are people who do not have chicken change. You are lucky. You're one of the lucky ones. Coming here in 2019, I came here with the whole idea: "I have to work so hard in school, work so hard to get a job. At my job, I have to work so hard to climb up." Growing up in Nigeria, I had a strong sense of community. You can't see someone who needs something and not give. It's just not possible. Your relatives could just come and eat off you for like a week or two weeks without bringing anything and, you know, it's just normal, it's what you do. When I came here, it was hard to draw the boundaries, because I would work late and be exhausted. I'd keep going. But five months, six months down the line, you're going to get tired. I think because I come from that background, I see helping my Black sisters as what I'm supposed to do. Some days I'm tired. I'm just really tired and I don't want to come to work. I still have to work, or I find a way to convince myself to go.

**MZ** Obviously you know how fiery I am, and that comes from my mom. I wanted to be an advocate for women, a voice for women who for whatever reason were on the spot, fighting against what was done to them, what wrongs have been done to them. When I told my mom that, she told me, your presence holds power. If you feel like you're being wronged or something is not right, speak up. Because if you're quiet, then who's going to do it for you? And that's why I'm always like, oh, this needs to be changed. And it does get exhausting sometimes, but for me, I'm learning the skill of advocating for myself, for the work environment. And the other thing that Bawo said—the sense of community and coming from Africa. We came here with that same idea of, if somebody is facing hardship, then we will be there for them. Working in our workplace like that, the weather does not allow it. We're told like, "oh, you can't spread yourself thin." But at the same time, it's not us spreading ourselves thin. It's just the way we were raised.

**BB** I wanted to add that for me, there's also support at work. There's Junie, there's Maysa . . . . If I want to rant, I just go to Tim Hortons and say, "oh this happened and this happened." And then we go back and we're normal and we go home. I still have some support at work too, Black women and other people of colour.

**PA** I'm struck by the "way that we were raised" comment and the role that might play in tiring us . . . How do we continue to move through the world? I'm asking this question because you are all repeatedly saying, that it is frustrating, saying, "I'm exhausted" and "I'm tired."

**BB** It's exhausting because you can only do so much. When I'm very present in my work, I realize that even though I take ten things out of my to-do list, twenty things still appear. There's another ten things after that. You work so hard, but you can't do it all. That is very exhausting. The second way is when a Black woman needs something I cannot provide. And I have Googled and called everybody and they're like, "oh I'm so sorry, we don't do this here." Half of the Black women that come already meet me with half expectations. I often want to be like, "ta da! Yay, we did it together." But then I'm telling them the old sob story that they're used to, so that is also frustrating in its own way. Another way is of course we're not being paid enough or being supported enough in this space, in this weather. There's not enough rainfall, there's not enough sunshine, there's just drought [laughs]. And we just try to, you know, grow, we're the seed that still tries to grow, grow, and grow in this terrible situation.

**PA** What happens to a seed that's trying to grow in a drought? Can we finish that metaphor? What do you imagine could happen to that seed?

**BB** Even if it sprouts and has small flowers here or there, they wouldn't be out for too long. They would die, they would die—they wouldn't last long [laughing].

**MZ** And as much as it is frustrating, I want to be that thorn in this whole wicked system. What makes it OK for us to be underpaid? What makes it OK that we are not being fed enough to be equipped enough to do our job? At the same time, why do we, working in our organization, find a way of venting out and spending our own money to feel fed and feel like, "oh, I'm good now, I can go back to work." If the majority of people that were working were caucasians under those same conditions, it would not have stayed that way. But we stay in the same condition, in the same working environment, and eventually accept it the way it is, because everywhere we go is going to be the same treatment for Black women. That goes back to deskilling and leaving that seed in a drought area that does not allow us to grow. I want to frustrate the system that allows this to happen.

**BB** I also wanted to add that this system chooses racialized folks. Some racialized folks are not used to having a voice. They're used to being shut down, being grateful for the little that is given. When a lot of people have that mindset and they work together in a place, the chances of them fighting the system or fighting for a change are slim. Because this is just normal, because it was worse back home. Here it seems slightly better, at least they pay in dollars [laughing].

**PA** [laughing] "Pay in dollars" —that's so good, I'll remember that.

**BB** Even before I got my current job, they kept asking me for Canadian experience, and I was like hey, I came from Nigeria and I just finished school. I have a lot of Nigerian experience—and I did have a lot of experience. You tend to be grateful for the little you've been given, and it's only when you start living that life of little that you realize, oh, there could be more, there is more. Why am I settling for little?

**MZ** That's why I was saying it's conditioning, leaving us in a dry area where you think it's the norm. And why should it be the norm?

**JD** You hear people saying that's how it's always been. And what I find heartbreaking, especially from racialized folks, is the "oh well, I'm just biding my time until I leave." So, it's these conditions, these drought conditions, where the expectations are low for good reason.

**PA** A poem is coming to mind, "Harlem" by Langston Hughes. The poem goes: "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun, or fester like a sore—and then run? Does it stink like rotten meat, or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet? Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. *Or does it explode?*" Everything that you're saying is making me think of this poem. I think the four of us are in this space because these are concerns that we live with differently, and we are trying not to explode.

[nodding]

**BB** This takes me back to your question about pace. Your pace, your client's pace, the organization's pace. I said it was my pace. But this is not always the case . . . I try to set intentions for myself. In this space, what do I hope to achieve? I really love the women I work with. I love the women I've come to know while working at this organization. I also know that my plans two or three years from now are to not be in this organization. At this moment I'm trying to do my best with all the limited resources I have. I'm also trying to gain new skills. What I find is that after doing my best with all the resources that I have, I'm too exhausted to get the new skills that I need to go on to the next stage that I want to get to. I've been telling myself to be more disciplined, to do this, to do that. I try to set boundaries at work. I show up on time, I show up as myself, and I'm happy, bubbly. I try to drop a few jokes here and there to see people smile. I do my work. Even if I have to stay back, I tell myself that it won't be more than an hour. The fact that I don't get to do what really feeds my soul makes it hard for me to show up as myself at my workplace, because my creative side isn't blooming. I'm trying to breathe.



**PA** What feeds your soul?

**BB** Music. Music does. I have a violin here that I'm still learning to play, but I don't have time to learn to play [laughing].

**MZ** Bring it to work! [laughing] What's keeping me from exploding is seeing that there's a dream still happening. Yes, in the past, people come and go, but at the moment the team that we have, they've had enough. When I talk to my coworkers, there's still some hope. Maybe the clouds are gonna move and the sun is going to shine ...

**PA** Can we handle the rainfall that comes when the cloud parts? What is this rain like? When the clouds part, what do we expect to see come down.

**MZ** I hope for a beautiful change. I believe at this time, this generation, our thinking is different than how it was twenty years ago. So, there will be a huge change. And it's going to be uncomfortable for us, because we're all used to how things were. With this huge change there will be a lot of anxiety, uncertainty. And that's when we can start to build brick by brick with this new mindset.

**BB** And the rain would allow the plants to grow ... in a broader context, just the rain that would empower women, the immigrant women, the Black women, not to settle for less and not to just take what they are given.

**MZ** And not feel like we were hired as a token to show the world diversity. We need time for ourselves, to grow, to say this is enough—I need a moment to step back. And it will be different because we won't be expected to do everything and be like, oh, we're okay, and walk away. Instead, we're mentally supported and we don't feel like when we go home, we're alone in this. My work environment really doesn't care about how we feel; they just want to see results.

**PA** It's been this emotional roller coaster listening and learning from both of you. Feeling a sense of familiarity with the experiences you're talking about, from a completely different context. It makes me sad how we are encouraged to exploit ourselves for the benefit of an institution ... and made to think of it as supporting the communities we belong to, or the vision we have of the world. It makes me understand a little bit more why I do what I do, and it makes me want to change how I do what I do. Thank you for allowing me to reflect through you and understand myself a little bit, in terms of how I operate in these institutions. I think we've been quite coy about this, so maybe I will move from that coyness and say, how do Black folks live in the weather?

**BB** Well, it feels like the weather wasn't made for us ... and we have to keep wearing winter jackets to fit in this weather, while we're made for tank tops—that's how it feels sometimes. I think, for me, I'm always shown how helpless I am. There's our organization as an institution and then there are other institutions that affect our institution. Even in my relationship with other institutions that affect our organization, I have power, but I can still only do so much. I can try and try and try and try but sometimes, regardless of how much I try or how hard I try, I still meet those roadblocks. It's like I'm not doing anything .... Right now, that's how I feel.

**MZ** For me ... it's different every day. Just like how Bawo said, the weather is not meant for us. Some days I'm hiding from the weather and protecting myself. And then there are some days where I'm standing out in it, and I'm like: "This weather is not for me, but here I am, what are you going to do?" It's about trying to find that one state where you're like, this weather is not for me, but I will make it work for me. For me, I have not found out how to create it, yet. I'm just navigating through this whole weather pattern, trying to find my own space in it.

**JD** You both have such beautiful ways of explaining and talking about that experience of this weather .... In my experience, as a Black woman, I know that I will interface with various institutions and people will still defer to my boss, even though I'm in a Director role. Sometimes it's subtle and sometimes it's blatant. You get shit on by everyone—clients, colleagues, other agencies. You go home and you have to ask somebody, did that just happen? It's just to say, the conditions don't often allow you to fight because you're so exhausted from fighting to go to work, to show up. That's the weather [laughs].

**MZ** The way I'm thinking about it is that we live in a society where there's a bigger weather pattern. For example, we are already portrayed, Black women and Black men, in a certain way. Coming to the workforce, the darker you are, the more challenges you face. When you come into the workplace, your managers, your supervisors, the organization itself has to set things up to protect you. For example, if a client says "she's aggressive to me" and she has no reasoning, it has to be said: "Why did you say this woman is aggressive? For what reason?" The organization has to let them know we don't allow this in this environment. I have seen instances where a woman says to a coworker, "I don't want to work with her because she's intimidating." And so the co-worker says, "OK I will work with you instead." And that kind of makes me feel bad because I'm thinking, am I aggressive now? I have to reevaluate myself. Those are the conditions,

the weather we're working under. I have to remind myself constantly, like no, I'm not aggressive; I'm standing my ground. I have my boundaries. And I do worry a lot, because, for instance, I will say what I'm feeling right there and then. I will say that this is racist, and why it's bothering me, and try to explain. But sometimes it's coworkers that say stuff that they don't even realize is racist. And then when you explain it to them, like hey, this came out in a racist way, this is a racist statement—they don't perceive it that way. They perceive it as being hostile. As "this angry Black woman will always get mad about everything." Then it just makes me very frustrated. And like, is this really happening or am I crazy?

**BB** I echo what Maysa said about having managers who understand or who are willing to understand what it means to be Black, a dark-skinned Black person, what it means to be Black generally. My manager is very supportive. I've had women who are like, "I don't want to work with her." I find that oftentimes I try to avoid those situations for the good of everyone [laughs]. Of course, there are times that I can't . . . There was this incident where I was working with one Black woman and one woman of colour, and we're both light-skinned. There was this guy that was coming at us, but he came at me. I was the one he came at, and I just kept thinking, this is something to think about . . . Sometimes I feel like people already perceive me as aggressive. And while that has its disadvantages, I find that sometimes they would rather not mess with me. It's not really a benefit, but I see it play out sometimes and it saves me the stress of having to prove something. The support is very important, especially in the organization because we're working with women who have mental health issues. There's this line, where, okay, this is mental illness and this is just personal bias. Sometimes it's hard to walk that line. You're encouraged to speak your mind and say what you feel. But once you do that, you're in trouble. You have to find a way to be diplomatic. Maysa is a huge support—she has no idea how much she helps me get through things. There's been one or two incidents of racism, but most of them are subtle . . . like what Junie said, did this really happen? Having someone to talk to about these incidents and having managers who back me up helps me a lot.

**PA** That's brilliant, brilliant. And what I'm loving and hearing between you two, is the network of support that you offer each other in navigating the colourism and the differential gender treatment in these institutions, in different ways, whether conscious or not.

**MZ** One example that I found was when Bawo was applying to be a supervisor, and what she had to go through, all the barriers she had to face to become a supervisor. I

found myself subconsciously being overprotective of her, wanting to protect her from how the weather was treating her. And it just got me thinking about how later, when she wants to apply to be a manager or wants to move up, how hard it will be for her just based on her skin colour being darker than mine.

**BB** Thanks for pointing that out Maysa [laughing]. I really liked when I came into the organization and I saw Junie in a position of authority. I was like OK, I see things are different here. I think a lot of Black women and dark-skinned Black women should be in positions of power so that people like me, when I look up, I see someone who looks like me. I won't be the first person aspiring to look up. And hopefully whoever gets up first would send a ladder down to get other people. This is not my personal experience, but I've had friends where their Black colleagues don't want to associate with them because as Black people they are trying their best to survive. They don't need to carry someone else on their back. I'm really glad Junie is here and Maysa is here and we're happy [laughs].

**JD** We're weathering the weather together.

**BB** I think we should say storming the weather. ■