City of Black Women's Shoulders: Examining Policy-Relevant

Educational Efforts for Liberation in Chicago

BY

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DISSERTATION

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This dissertation is dedicated to all the Black women out here fighting the good fight across Chicago and beyond — working tirelessly with limited resources to develop grassroots programs, policies, and practices to help us get free — all because you have the faith of a mustard seed to believe that we have everything we need. Although we rarely get the credit or acknowledgement we deserve, I see you, sis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BRC	Black Researchers Collective
CWI	Community Workshop Intensive
BFT	Black Feminist Thought
BLO	Black-Led Organization

SUMMARY

This study examined how Black women leading Black-led organizations (BLOs) work toward Black liberation, and the characteristics or attributes that exist across BLOs led by Black women. It explored how Black women lead and whether the approaches they are using to help us get free leverage similar strategies, independent of one another. I argued that education policy must be contextual and rooted in the assets and educational practices of the communities most harmed and historically disproportionately impacted, particularly those led by Black women. I also argued that, based on our collective marginalized identities of being Black and woman, we negotiate and navigate policy-relevant priorities in alignment with the expertise of our lived experiences to strategically advance an agenda toward the liberation of all people.

I leveraged Black Feminist Thought and radical Black feminism as the overarching theoretical frameworks to autoethnographically tell this story through the lens and work of the Black Researchers Collective, a grassroots community-based organization on the south side of Chicago training and equipping communities with research tools to be more civically engaged and policy informed. This study included the collection and analysis of program workshop applicant data (*n*=155), 129 participant workshop surveys (*n*=43), 200 participant workshop journals (*n*=50), post-program workshop interviews (*n*=7), Board meeting observations (*n*=10), and interviews with Black women working within (*n*=8) and external to (*n*=16) the Black Researchers Collective.

Study findings indicated that Black women are resisting through education. Black women across the south and west sides of Chicago are developing, curating, and employing various education models in community as a key mechanism to collectively resist systems of oppression and collectively help us get free. Black women are using varied educational techniques and strategies to carry out and amplify their organization's mission and values; the

successful outcomes of which suggest possible implications for education policy on a state and local level.

Chapter One
Introduction

This is a story. About real people in real life fighting for real change. This is a story that leverages research tools and approaches to pay homage to the strongholds, torch bearers, and pillars of our communities—Black women—and demonstrate why it is necessary to invest in their vision and collective practices, and the implications that it might have for education policy. This is a non-traditional dissertation in the sense that it transcends the boundaries of the step-by-step checklist of what you might think “should” be included in terms of format and content organization. It is non-traditional because I am unconventional, and this is an autoethnographic piece of work that is a reflection of me. It is non-traditional because the ways in which we work and build together as Black women are often unconventional. The ways in which we show up and the varied approaches to our practice is sometimes a bit unorthodox, but my lived experiences have taught me that I have to do some things different from others to get a different outcome. Doing the same things in the same ways and expecting a different result never got anyone anywhere. Moreover, as much as this is a rigorous requirement for an academic program, this is for my people. My audience, no matter the forum, will always be the people that I work in community with and serve. The language, style, and format here is for them. No worries though, what you seek to find is all here. But if you read this with the lens of only looking for what you think should be here and how you think it should be here, you’ll miss the beauty of what’s actually here, which is an archival or documentation of a historic moment led by Black women across Chicago. Follow me, and I promise that we’ll get there together.

In this dissertation, I use both first and third person pronouns in reference to Black women, almost interchangeably, to affirm and validate my own lived experiences as a Black woman and align my struggles of solidarity with them. Much of it will read poetically, because, well, I am poet. In fact, I have included a great deal of poetry and prose therein. This is my radical attempt at leveraging “Black feminist poethics” (Da Silva, 2014) to help the reader

understand and interpret my/our experiences through the lens of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1989) and poetry. Moreover, this use of storytelling is integral to the ways in which I choose to get free. It is my tool of resistance and one strategy that I employ to address the racial trauma that I have experienced that brought me to this path, promoting wellness and healing along my journey (Chioneso, 2020). Throughout this dissertation, you will observe more than one voice, sometimes within the same section: one that speaks from the center of the artistic creative and organizer in me and another that speaks from my scholarly core. The use of both is deliberate and intentional. When I speak of Black liberation, I am referring to the multitude of ways that we as Black people choose to get free to create the reality that we envision for ourselves. Given these political, intellectual, and personal commitments, this entire body of work investigates two central questions: (1) How do Black women leading Black-led organizations (BLOs) work toward Black liberation? (2) What characteristics or attributes exist across Black-led organizations (BLOs) led by Black women? In pursuing these research questions, I consider the social, the spiritual, the economic and material, and the political outcomes for Black people in this definition, and how their self-definitions manifest in the meaning-making of their work. In a nutshell, this study explores how Black women lead and whether the approaches they are using to help us get free leverage similar strategies, independent of one another.

The Truthtellers

In writing this dissertation, I struggled with uplifting the challenges and tensions that myself, and other Black women, face in leadership while working with our people. I've often felt that these tensions are not to be shared in mixed company, a cloak of protection that I consciously project to prevent us from exposure to unfair critiques or negative sentiments that may lead to undue and unnecessarily harms, as Black women are so often subject to in the world. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) examines this phenomenon in her book *Sister citizen:*

Shame, stereotypes, and Black women in America, in which she discusses the experiences of Black women in the U.S. and argues that Black women are often subjected to harmful stereotypes and myths that limit their opportunities and harm their well-being. Harris-Perry also discusses how Black women have historically worked to resist these harmful narratives and create new, empowering ones. The truth is, we're always protective of other people but rarely are others protective of us. The development and widespread prevalence of the hashtag #ProtectBlackWomen that emerged on social media from Black women across the country in response to the killing of Breonna Taylor[1] in 2020 is evidence of this. Three years later, we're still using it to highlight our collective struggles and celebrate our resilience. Well, I know that I am. With that in mind, I never want to be *that* Black person that when my people read this, they say, "Damn, sis, did you really have to do us like that?" However, I do recognize that there is a fine line between airing my people out to dry and truth telling. This tension often eats away me, in life, in nearly everything that I do. It's bad. Real bad. I'm better than what I used to be but am very much guilty of participating in respectability politics, mostly because I, and other Black women, have had to lean into a certain presentation of self as a tool of respectability, as Feminista Jones (2019) writes about in *Reclaiming Our Space* in order to be taken seriously. In *When and Where I Enter*, Paula Giddings (1984) further amplifies this in her discussion of respectability politics as a way for Black women to challenge stereotypes and gain respectability within society. Granted, I am aware of all the ways that respectability politics are harmful to Black women, from the burden on Black women to conform to white middle-class standards (Harris-Perry, 2011), the creation of divisions within the Black community (Cottom, 2018), and gatekeeping that excludes us (Kendall, 2020), to internalized oppression (Collins, 2000), and the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes (Harris, 2021) and binary gender norms (Snorton, 2017). I embrace my rage, as Brittany Cooper suggests we do *In Eloquent Rage* to demand

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/article/breonna-taylor-police.html

social and political change, but I admit, it's hard to reject it all, especially when I have the lived experience of not being seen, heard, valued, or respected when I rage accordingly. There are real social and material consequences that extend well beyond this intellectual dialogue. Nevertheless, there you have it, the first tension of writing about Black women as a Black woman.

After vulnerably sharing this internal conflict with a Black man on my dissertation committee, he said, "It sounds like you don't trust the people that you're writing this for to get it. But the people who shared their stories with you entrusted you with those stories for a reason." In the moment, I felt as if he was reading my life, but I knew he was right. My motivation? I didn't want anyone to feel betrayed. However, the projection of my own insecurities will serve us no purpose here. That said, I have attempted to tease out these tensions and contradictions in a way that may lead to some critical discussions that we need to have amongst our people and/or yield some growth and learning for others in their spiritual daily practices of figuratively calling people to the front of the congregation in the work. It is my hope that situating this body of work in a space of truth telling, in the legacy of all of the truthtellers who came before me, will help strengthen our path forward.

The Context

"Americans have long been trained to see the deficiencies of people rather than policy. It's a pretty easy mistake to make: People are in our faces. Policies are distant. We are particularly poor at seeing the policies lurking behind the struggles of people" (Kendi, 2019).

The United States political economy was built on the exploitation and occupational segregation of people of color through government policies and institutional practices (Solomon et al., 2019) deliberately intended to advantage white people, which has resulted in chronic racial inequities that exist today across multiple sectors of everyday life. The emergence of many of these policies came after the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865 formally abolishing slavery (Drexler, 2018). Sentiments of anti-blackness

that justified Black subjugation through violence, mistreatment, and discrimination for no reason other than the color of their skin have fueled the belief that Black people could or should not be privy to full participation in the economy of every life. This belief has led to policies and practices that have prevented Black people from having access to key levers of survival and socioeconomic acceleration such as jobs, housing, and education. Policies connected to each of these areas have long-standing ripple effects that are prevalent today. Hiring discrimination against Black Americans hasn't declined in 25 years (Quillian, 2017). Three out of four neighborhoods "redlined" on government maps 80 years ago remain struggling and considered low-to-moderate income today (Mitchell & Franco, 2018; Jan, 2018; Resler, 2019). Education policy is constrained by housing policy (Rothstein, 2015) at the federal, state, and local level. The same policies and practices that created segregated neighborhoods also produced segregated schools and disparate educational outcomes that have yet to be atoned for (Catalyst, 2020). Recognizing these explicitly racially motivated policy deficiencies and shortcomings, I argue that education policy must be contextual and rooted in the assets and educational practices of the communities most harmed and historically disproportionately impacted, particularly those led by Black women.

While the Black community is always being researched (Chicago Beyond, 2018), little has been done to understand what tactics and strategies employed by Black-led organizations work to influence policies across the nation, despite the central role such organizations have played in generating social, political, and economic change. For example, after many years of diligently organizing to address the school-to-prison pipeline, Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) was a key youth organization responsible for the passing of SB100 in August 2015, a comprehensive effort in Illinois that served to limit punitive measures (suspensions and expulsions) in K-12 schools and proactively promote support programs and services across the state. We have yet to see the practices and strategies of organizations such as VOYCE that have been codified and publicly made available as a roadmap for other

organizers, mobilizers, and community influencers be integrated into a state level process as a model for policy change in similar ways. Another example of this is HR 7120 or the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020 which came as a result of Black leaders, organizers, and organizations mobilizing for reform and abolition, respectively, across the nation. The death of George Floyd and countless other unarmed black bodies killed by police in the midst of a global pandemic created a window of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 1984) that led to the proposal of the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act to address state-sanctioned violence and systemic racism with regard to law enforcement. While Black organizers and organizations clearly have shaped policy in the United States, little is known about the internal processes, philosophies, values, tactics, and strategies that have led to such success, without losing a broader commitment to Black liberation. This dissertation offers a lens into some of the internal process, philosophies, values, tactics, and strategies that Black women employ in their freedom struggles. It also offers an opportunity for people to reflect on how they can best support and sustain Black communities by intentionally and deliberately supporting the practices of Black women. After all, Black women would make some savvy policy entrepreneurs.

Policy entrepreneurs are people who leverage opportunities to advance or influence various policy outcomes. Policy entrepreneurs can also be "street level bureaucrats" (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977) but they are not necessarily one and the same, as street level bureaucrats often work as a liaison between policy makers and the people, while policy entrepreneurs—ordinary people in the right window of time—can directly influence policy themselves. A good example of this is Hickory Hills, Illinois resident Debbie Chafee[2] who was able to rewrite Illinois' school funding formula back in 2015 after she discovered that it would reduce her daughter's school district's budget by $4 million. One white woman was able to stop Senate Bill 16 and has since become one of the most influential voices in the fight for Illinois'

[2] https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/daily-southtown/ct-sta-kadner-chafee-school-funding-st-0208-20150206-column.html

education reform (Kadner, 2015). John Kingdon articulates this from the perspective of self-interest, but I argue that, similar to that of HR 7120, a role as such could be advantageous to those seeking to influence policy on behalf of and in coordination with communities and grassroots organizers for the greater good of the people. Sadly, that bill (HR 7120) died on the Senate floor, but it would not have made it as far as it did if it were not for the efforts of Black organizing bodies, the details of which are largely unexplored and unacknowledged, on the ground seeking policy change.

Some scholars are rather skeptical of policy solutions, arguing that policy-related measures shift our understanding of the production of racial identity, inequality, and power (HoSang, 2010). While there is some truth to this, the significance of this study is major. Black communities across the nation, particularly in Chicago, are declining in population (Scarborough et al., 2020) and experiencing significantly shorter life expectancies than non-Black folks (Aikens et al., 2021) yet strategies toward sustainable solutions can be found in Black communities with Black people who are disproportionately impacted by harm. The solutions to problems faced by the Black community are not easy, but the mere existence of these solutions have yet to be recognized by policy and decision makers who develop, weld, and allocate material resources that have deleterious consequences for Black communities. This dissertation's investigation of the relationship between Black-led organizations and policy unpacks and amplifies how Black-led organizations are attempting to access and transform systemic processes to be more conducive to and contextually considerate of their lived experiences. In other words, understanding how Black-led organizations have successfully mobilized for change can inform, support, and facilitate the work of emergent, Black-led organizations. Given the formal and informal leadership roles of Black women in their communities, this body of work provides insight into the policy-relevant and inherently political practices of Black women, suggesting that Black women are well suited for policy decisions and processes that often exclude them.

In addition, understanding the intentionality of strategic efforts co-constructed and curated by Black women informed by their collective knowledge could support the advancement of policy agendas and policy-relevant processes advantageous to the overall wellness and wellbeing of Black people. Black women are uniquely positioned to serve in this capacity both as a result of their lived experiences with multiple systems of oppression and their general care and concern for the viability of this nation, which includes the levers of government working for everyone. The relationship between the state and Black liberation has been complex, marked by both cooperation and conflict. Historically, the state has often been a key agent in the suppression of Black liberation movements, using various forms of coercion and violence to maintain white supremacy and social control. At the same time, Black liberation movements have often sought to challenge and transform the state, demanding greater political power, economic justice, and social equality. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016) discusses this in *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black liberation*. Mariame Kaba (2021) addresses this from an abolitionist perspective in *We do this 'til we free us: Abolitionist organizing and transformative justice*, arguing that the state's reliance on punishment and control perpetuates racial oppression and that transformative justice offers a more effective and just alternative. In *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition*, Cedric Robinson (1983) speaks to this from a Marxist perspective, arguing that the struggle for Black liberation is deeply intertwined with the struggle for socialism and global revolution.

Plainly stated, this study is one of many contributions toward the liberation of Black people so that all people can live and achieve more equitable outcomes. Though there are many parallels between the Black community and other communities of color, I do not spend a great deal of time teasing out those relationships in an effort to remain focused on the unique needs and priorities of the Black community. I will, however, acknowledge and recognize, where relevant, the joint freedom struggles of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities who work together in solidarity toward liberation. Black-led organizations are an

important site of struggle and liberation. They are spaces of solidarity and resistance and are inherently educational because those who run and participate in them come equipped with a set of empirical experiences that often informs their practice. Many Black-led organizations are centered around the needs of the Black community in recognition that historically, policies have been racist and used to uphold white supremacy; the long-tern effects of which are still prevalent in everyday life. Because Black people have been disproportionately harmed by policies and policy processes, working to mobilize from the center of Black struggle can contribute to the creation of alternative policies that not only affirm Black life but have major implications for the material conditions that directly impact them.

That said, it is important to examine these relationships through the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought (BFT), which is rooted in Black women's resistance and the work of Black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (1989) who argues that Black women have developed distinctive interpretations of their own oppression by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge itself. Our perspective or standpoints on our oppression, as echoed by Collins, help formulate and shape alternative ways of thinking and doing because, first and foremost, we experience the world very differently from those who are not Black and female. Our political and economic status lends itself to unique experiences and perspectives not experienced by others, especially as it pertains to the material realities of the world and context in which we live. Moreover, we experience and interpret reality differently from that of the dominant group. These experiences, taken together, contribute to a Black feminist consciousness pertaining to those material realities, one that is inextricably linked to both who we are and where we come from. In *Home Girls*, Barbara Smith (2000) uplifts this for the readers when she says, "But I just get so frustrated because I feel people don't understand where we came from. When I look at the photographs in our scrapbook I think if they looked at the house, would they understand better...? Because of where we were living, the size of the rooms...Sometimes I do wish people could just see us in the context we grew up in, who our

people are." As Barbara is alluding to this idea that we do not exist in a vacuum, our collective knowledge, perspectives, and how we show up in the world is informed by where and how we were rooted.

For decades, these standpoints have supported Black women in resisting their own domination in response to the deliberate suppression of the independent thoughts of Black feminists, even well before there was language and terms to articulate what and how Black women interpret their own experiences. This collective knowledge shared by a group, and the recognition of Black women as experts of their lived and shared experiences, are fundamental to Black Feminist Thought. Subsequently, these thoughts shape a collective identity, one in which Black women value their own knowledge base and validate their own contributions within the fabric of our social system. Policy is so often secondary to the needs of the community. It is crucial that we have a proactive rather than reactive approach to policy (Fowler, 2012). It is important to acknowledge that the policymaking process writ large was never meant to be a tool governed by the will of the people. In addition to the voices of Black women, this is something that Black men have been writing about for years as well. Dating back to the period of Black reconstruction after the Civil War between 1860 and 1880, W.E.B. DuBois (1935) argued that despite the potential for radical change, the policymaking process was controlled by wealthy white elites who ultimately blocked any meaningful progress for Black people. In Martin Luther King's iconic "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963), he discussed the moral imperative for nonviolent resistance to racial injustice, and critiqued the policymaking process for being unresponsive to the needs and interests of Black people. In "The Ballot or the Bullet", Malcolm X (1964) argued for us to use our voting power for change to resist because policymaking processes were dominated by white elites who had little interest in representing or responding to our needs. In *Race Matters*, Cornel West (2018) argued that racism in America is not only pervasive and structural, but that the policymaking process has historically failed to address the root causes of racial inequality and injustice.

Policy has been leveraged as a tool of regulation but was never meant to be used by those who are regulated to regulate themselves according to how and what they believe is best for them. I feel this is important to mention because policy tends to function as policy does, to benefit some and not others. Every system is designed to benefit itself. The system of policymaking is no different. For example, there is much wrong with policy that many folks may not perceive as being wrong with policy because the policies are functioning as they were designed. Even when policy victories are made, the system has found ways to spring back to its original form. Following the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision, which ruled that segregation of public schools was unconstitutional, many school districts across the United States were legally forced to integrate their schools. However, despite these efforts, many schools remain highly segregated along racial and socioeconomic lines (Orfield and Eaton, 1996). Cities experienced white flight, housing segregation, and school district gerrymandering. Many predominantly white families moved to suburban areas or enrolled their children in private schools to avoid integrated schools. School districts gerrymandered their boundaries to exclude low-income and minority students from attending better-resourced schools. These practices have led to what some scholars have called the "resegregation" of public schools, which perpetuates educational inequities and reinforces racial and socioeconomic segregation (Orfield and Lee, 2005). This shows that even after a landmark policy victory like Brown v. Board, the system has found ways to maintain the status quo and prevent true racial integration and equity (Orfield, 2014). Thinking about this from that perspective, the process of addressing policy or policy improvement must include new and innovative strategies for systemic change. It's difficult to include communities into policy process models that were never intended for them in the first place. They'll always be an afterthought or something that the policy elite won't get to if the process structure can still function efficiently without them. Perhaps this raises concerns for leveraging or pushing for policies because of the very framework that is relied upon to do so. However, it is still a necessary and valuable process

for leveraging change in the context of the U.S. That said, if process models were structurally adapted for inclusion in such a way that would make it difficult to generate and enact policy without certain stakeholder groups at the table, we wouldn't have any other choice but to work with communities differently. It is important to acknowledge, as the skeptics would, that communities contend, they disagree, and sometimes those who become representatives of the community obtain power, and in many cases, still replicate ideological and social formations that reinforce subordination. Yet and still, this is still an approach and frame of reference that we must have when addressing policy challenges and determining the best process and practices for policy solutions, especially as it pertains to policy formation. It's certainly not a one-size-fits-all model but can very much be generously applied to many fields across the policy spectrum. A goal of this dissertation is to unmuddy the waters of policy by facilitating clearer pathways to policy processes and rethinking agenda priorities for discussion, criticism, and debate based on the lived experiences and contributions of those most impacted by it, Black women. There is no shortage of literature on how to do good research therefore we should better use research to help us consider our strongest options for leveraging, influencing, and/or shaping the policy process to the benefit of everyone, especially those adversely impacted at the center; which is what this body of research intends to do.

One of the most important contributions of this dissertation to the field is an understanding of how the collective practices of Black women in Chicago working on a local level can and are contributing to social and material change in a broader ecosystem of fighting the good fight toward Black liberation. To best demonstrate this, Chapter Two highlights a liberating theoretical framework for policy change that centers around the love and empowerment of Black women, Black organizers, and Black-led organizations. I discuss Black-led organizations as spaces of resistance the mobilize cultural attributes as a means of survival and resistance. I explore the concept of Black liberation as Afrofuturism, which imagines a

future where Black people are free from oppression and have the power to shape their own destiny.

Overall, the chapter offers a new perspective on policy change that prioritizes the love and empowerment of Black women and centers their leadership in Black-led organizations as spaces of resistance and liberation. Chapter Three discusses the use of autoethnography as a methodology to understand our lived experiences in the context of our leadership. I discuss autoethnography as a research method that combines personal narrative and cultural analysis to explore how we navigate and make sense of our lives, and why it was necessary to leverage this method as a tool in this body of work. Chapter Four primarily focuses on the exploration of two primary areas of interests through a bird's eye view of the Black Researchers Collective's external reach and community impact. Through an autoethnographic lens, this chapter provides a unique perspective that helps to contextualize and bring to life the work of Black women leading BLOs in the struggle for Black liberation. By examining the Black Researchers Collective's external reach and community impact, we gain valuable insight into the Collective's role in advancing the broader goals of the Black community. In doing so, we hope to contribute to ongoing conversations in the field and communities around the experiences, challenges, and successes of Black-led organizations led by Black women. Overall, this chapter serves as a crucial foundation for the subsequent chapters, which further explore the BRC's work and its intersection with the broader, Black-led organizational landscape. Chapter Five seeks to deepen my exploration of how Black women leading Black-led organizations (BLOs) are working toward Black liberation and amplifies the characteristics or attributes that exist across Black-led organizations (BLOs) through the lens of Black women internal and external to the Black Researchers Collective. This chapter highlights how education is being used for collective liberation in the struggle for freedom. Chapter Six, in the form of a policy brief, demonstrates the relevance of these attributes and contributions with regard to their significance in transforming education policy. It outlines three policy-relevant action steps for advancing the educational

work and community-centered priorities of Black women on a state and local level. My concluding chapter, Chapter Seven, weaves the thread between them all to restate and emphasize key arguments and relevant positions accordingly.

Chapter Two
Literature and Landscape

Our Blackness is beautiful
Something to be celebrated
The reverse case of a funeral
A place where Black lives have wisdom with more eyes than the characters of roman numerals
Let's pour out the libations for the death of our unworthiness
The worldliness and burliness of our oppression prevents us
from somehow living in a world of bliss
We think we're opposites
but we're not
Just spiritual beings on different journeys with similar stories but different plots
Just curvaceous bodies on similar planes flying through space to different spots
Just love making creatures tryna feel all of the love that a broken heart got
Blackness is beautiful
Joyful
Like the noise of a four-part choir harmony on Sunday in a Baptist church
Lit
Like 90s house parties with sweaty backs and vibrating rumps shaking the Earth
Funny
Like inside jokes and silent innuendos in public with the homies that has you laughing from the pit of your stomach to the base of your throat
Blackness is beautiful
And simply abundant
Like
No matter what tomorrow brings, I'm rich in this moment
Abundant like
No matter what your mama got in her bank account, she rich in the Lord
Like
"Who all at the party?" cause I'm bringing my boys
Abundant like
We got everything we need so come thru with the kids
Like
I know I’m in between paychecks but I'm still sharing my ends
Blackness is beautiful
And something to be celebrated
Hot combed pressed down and banquet dressed up elevated
My energy proceeds me
Recurring lifetimes receive me
Universe-soul graded
I stay blessed up
Never faded
No circus in this business
Cause one monkey don't stop no show

You gon always see me smile
Churning from a love within that some will never know
Because I recognize that...
Our Blackness is beautiful
And it's something to be celebrated
— Glenance aka InnerG

Despite there not being a comprehensive body of literature that explores or discusses the specific relationships that I'm investigating, there is a body of work exploring Black Feminist Thought, radical Black feminisms, Black organizing, healing justice frameworks, Abolitionist feminisms, and the relationship between Black liberation and Afrofuturism that I find value in acknowledging. It is my hope that the related literature that has been cultivated in these areas might clarify the context of my work in hopes to help unpack why this study, that attempts to addresses current limitations, is important and essential to filling in the gaps.

A liberating theoretical framework for policy change

The theoretical framework for this study is a liberating one. In this dissertation, I use Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and radical Black feminisms as the overarching paradigms for this study. These frameworks emerged and then bloomed through a 19th and 20th century era of Black female exclusion, routine violence against the Black female body, deep marginalization of contributions, and disregard for the humanity of the Black woman's whole self, not dissimilar to the conditions and plight of the Black woman today.

This theoretical framework is essential because the foundation of BFT is rooted in Black women's resistance and the work of key Black feminist intellectuals such as Patricia Hill Collins (1989), who argues, "Black women have developed distinctive interpretations of their own oppression by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge itself" (p. 746). Similar to Collins, I believe that Black women are neither passive victims nor willing accomplices in their own oppression and demise. Moreover, they have two primary standpoints on their own oppression, both of which are self-defined. The first is that we experience the world very differently from those who are not Black and female. Akin to the intersecting identities described

by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995), our political and economic status lends itself to unique experiences and perspectives not experienced by others. More specifically, the experience of Black women is both the product of racism and sexism wherein race and gender are always interacting to shape Black women's multidimensional experiences through multiple forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1990). The second is that we experience and interpret reality differently from that of the dominant group, despite ideological convictions that may be contradictory to others within our subcultural group. Taken together, these experiences contribute to a Black feminist consciousness pertaining to those material realities. These standpoints support Black women in resisting their own domination in response to the deliberate suppression of the independent thoughts of Black feminists.

The mere existence of these standpoints, however, is not necessarily inherently Black Feminist Thought. Collective knowledge is key. The concept of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) encompasses two crucial aspects: knowledge shared by a community and the recognition of Black women as experts of their own experiences (Collins, 1989). Although these two components are distinct, they work together in a mutually beneficial way. By sharing their knowledge, Black women can shape a collective identity that values their unique perspectives and contributions. This recognition, in turn, helps to validate their knowledge base within the broader social system. In essence, BFT emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and valuing the knowledge and experiences of Black women as a means of building a more equitable and inclusive society. In this regard, experience is ideological and therefore able to be theorized, and BFT is one theoretical tradition that makes sense of these experiences in a way that can potentially influence policy in major and critical ways. For example, in a study on rural women and anti-poverty strategies, Adele Norris (2012) argues for the value of integrating Black feminist epistemology through the utilization of an intersectionality perspective and the voices of local actors/stakeholders to purposefully examine individuals located at the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and/or class to ensure that policy doesn't inadvertently discriminate

against or benefit some women more than others. Enhancing the possibilities of being able to shape policy into one with more equitable outcomes is a major offering of BFT in the context of this study.

A crucial underpinning of Black Feminist Thought most relevant to this study is an Afrocentric feminist epistemology (Collins, 1989). The core values of our ancestors that bleed through Black communities across the world existed long before the construction of racial oppression. In *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Clenora Hudson-Weems (2019) illuminates this by arguing that African women have always held key roles in their communities and that these roles have been rooted in cultural practices and traditions that predate the era of slavery and colonialism. In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Patricia J. Williams (1991) further extends this point by emphasizing the ways in which people have fought against racial oppression through the preservation and celebration of cultural values, traditions, and practices. Systems of racial domination such as colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and apartheid created a shared experience of oppression for Black people. Afrocentric feminist epistemology helps us understand how oppressed folks build knowledge that supports their efforts of resistance. This is not to say that we, as Black women, share a uniform epistemology because we are not a monolith, but it is to say that our standpoints and epistemology are unique and distinct from women of other races and Black men. In some respects, Black women are more closely related to Black men on their standpoints, particularly as it pertains to addressing anti-blackness and the fight for racial equity, from the elevation of key priorities of the Black Lives Matter movement to equal access to high-quality education and the increased representation of Black people in positions of power all across the country. In other respects, they are more closely related to white women, particularly as it pertains to the reproductive rights of women, violence against women and girls, and the equitable access to pay on par with men. Yet and still, their standpoints as a collective can remain independent of both. Deborah King (1988) described this “both/and” phenomenon of the multiple realities of Black women as "multiple consciousness in

Black women's politics," indicating a state of simultaneously belonging and not belonging as an essential component of Black women’s oppositional consciousness. Bonnie Thornton Dill (1979) discusses this “both/and” orientation as central to an Afrocentric feminist consciousness through the "dialectics of Black womanhood,” which underscores how Black women live with contradictions. Sojourner Truth (1851) highlights these contradictions best in her famous speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” delivered at the 1851 Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio.

> *That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?*

Sojourner amplifies the experience of womanhood, not as a one-dimensional concept, but as a dialectical consideration to be seen more comprehensively through the eyes of all who experience it. This is why Jameta Barlow and Breya Johnson (2021) argue for the use of Black feminism and womanism as epistemologies (Bowleg, 2017) to critically address Black women's health policy because when Black women use their experiences to theorize and organize, movements begin. Black women-led organizations such as Black Women’s Health Imperative are a prime example of this as they ask Black women about their health, listen to their responses, and leverage that feedback and their experiences to advocate, empower, and develop health policy accordingly (Barlow & Johnson, 2021; Blount, 2018). Similarly, this study explored how these corresponding knowledge production processes that Black women employed in their organizations could be used to potentially influence policy in meaningful ways.

Historically, traditional feminisms have excluded and devalued the multidimensional experiences of Black women (Combahee River Collective, 1983; Smith, 1977). Despite the shared concerns of legal status and rights, discrimination, and sexual victimization, the de-emphasization of race and class have had direct consequences for Black women (King, 1988; hooks, 2014). Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis (1986) argue that Black women cannot be wholeheartedly committed and fully active in both the Black liberation struggle and the women's liberation movement because of sexual and racial politics within each respectively; racialized and gendered systems operating within traditional feminist struggles have had oppressive and marginalizing consequences for Black women, a sentiment later rearticulated by Crenshaw (1989) to demonstrate the theoretical erasure of Black women. Other scholars, however, illustrate how Black women can and often do address issues concerning them interdependently across liberation struggles (Smith, 1977). The necessity of addressing all forms of systemic oppression is one of the hallmarks of Black Feminist Thought (King, 1988).

Because of the pervasiveness of racism and sexism, Black women experience compounding oppression. These dual discriminations aimed at the subjugation of Black women are what Frances Beale (2008) refers to as “double jeopardy”. Beale believes that revolutionaries have a responsibility to not only overthrow or unseat harmful beings in positions of power but to create new institutions that abolish systems of oppression for everyone. Black women play a central role in creating the change that we want to see, a world free from the residue of racism and the exploitation of capitalism. According to Angela Davis (2011), the women’s liberation movement in the U.S. has always been hampered by the racist and classist biases of its leadership, from the white supremacist practices to elitist ideologies and behaviors non-inclusive of the Black woman’s role in the workforce (Dill, 1979). Black women have been feminists since the early 1800s, long before our exclusion in the white women’s movement in the 20th century (King, 1988). Historian Shirley Yee (1992) writes that "between 1830 and the 1860s, black women abolitionists developed a collective feminist consciousness that reflected

their particular experiences as black women as well as the aspects of sexism they shared with white women" (p. 151). However, the presence and contributions of Black women with regard to explicitly addressing various forms of oppression in their struggles for freedom became more prominent in the 1970s. The invisibility and erasure of highly valuable roles occupied by southern Black women (such as Septima Poinsette Clark, McCree Harris, Shirley Sherrod, Diane Nash, Johnnie Carr, Thelma Glass, Georgia Gilmore, and JoAnn Robinson) in the civil rights movement (Barnett, 1993) in the decade before contributed to the conditions and need for self-directed organizational leadership that emerged thereafter as well. For example, the National Black Feminist Organization, most active between 1973 and 1979, successfully served to challenge myths about Black women and the feminist movement, make the leadership of Black women visible and known, and address and transform the private concerns of Black women into public issues (Davis, 1988). The Combahee River Collective, a collective of Boston-based Black and lesbian feminists formed in 1974, was also actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and saw their task as the development of integrated analysis and practice based the major interlocking systems of oppression (Collective, 1983). They argued that the synthesis of all these oppressions are the conditions of our lives therefore Black feminism was the political movement to combat the simultaneous oppressions that Black women experience, an experience that included the narratives and experiences of both lesbians and non-queer women and their internal disagreements across class and political differences in service of a collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power (Collective, 1983). Hortense Spillers (1994) expounds on this analysis in *Mamas Baby, Papas Maybe* where she elevates the consciousness of BFT and the need for reconfiguring representational potentialities through the exploration of race and gender within space and time. Her argument is concerned with markings used to describe how systems of oppression, reflected in each of her identities, function to diminish and erase Black women within the political economy of our everyday lives. She leverages her cultural text as a

historical discourse highlighting that motherhood for Black women as a blood birthright is both simultaneously denied and socially enacted, a mother and mother-dispossessed, therefore it is our role to make room for a radical social subject as opposed to a gendered one so that we characterize ourselves for our own female empowerment. This text, in and of itself, gave Black women a vocabulary to claim as they ground and write their own narratives amidst the attempts of erasure and the confrontation of violence for simply being Black and woman (Spillers et al., 2007).

My articulation of a Black feminist ideology for this study is most closely aligned with Deborah King (1988) who asserts that a Black feminist ideology is a declaration of visibility for Black people because it is rooted in reality. For King, this ideology has four operational functions: (1) it acknowledges the special importance of being Black and female; (2) it views self-determination is essential to Black feminism, (3) it fundamentally challenges the interstructure of oppressions; and (4) it presumes Black women to be powerful, independent beings. As a result of economic exploitation and marginalization of Black women, the development and reliance on a Black feminist ideology is key to survival (Steady, 1981) because it is a way of building solidarity and liberating ourselves. For many years, much of this ideology has been suppressed by traditional notions of womanhood that shape American life. In *Tomorrow's Tomorrow,* Joyce Ladner (1971) writes that "the total misrepresentation of the Black community and the various myths which surround it can be seen in microcosm in the Black female adolescent." This misrepresentation has been deeply influenced by literature and media, deliberate and by design. For example, the four major problems that pervade the literature on Black families, as described by Bonnie Thornton Dill (1979), is the use of inadequate historical data and/or the misinterpretation of that data, erroneous or partially conceived assumptions about the relationship of blacks to white society, differences between the values of the researcher and those of the subject, and the general confusion of class and culture. In addition to these major problems, negative images regarding Black women in literature persisted

(Steady, 1981). In Christina Sharpe's book*, In the wake: On blackness and being,* she demonstrates how microaggressions have serious consequences for Black people. These microaggressions can be verbal, visual, literary, and/or empirical. Illustrating through the theme of the transportation of the Middle Passage, Sharpe describes 'in the wake' as the extent to which Black life remains in close proximity to death. She argues for one aspect of Black being in the wake as consciousness and proposes that to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing presence of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding, and rather than seeking a resolution to blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of consciousness (Sharpe, 2016). That consciousness can be seen through "wake work" or the sites of artistic production, resistance, and consciousness (Sharpe, 2016) that emerge from the struggle of Black women in an attempt to define and construct alternative narratives best aligned with the authentic reality of their lived experiences, amplifying Black women's existence at the intersections of multiple systems of oppression (a key tenet of BFT) and how they leverage "wake work" as a tool of survival "in the wake" across historical contexts.

The use of Black Feminist Thought as a liberating theoretical framework in this autoethnographic study with narratives and contributions both poetic and artistically creative in nature is my form of "wake work". I refer to it as liberating because it is a contribution toward the path of liberation and simultaneously how I, as a Black woman, get free. Jordan Camp (2016) once said, "While the poetry of social movements is rarely seriously considered in debates about alternatives to neoliberalism, its significance for understanding the present moment cannot be overstated." I reference this quote because it is exemplary of the "wake work" self-initiated by the poets, novelists, scholars, and activists of the 20th century. We see this in poet and novelist Alice Walker's work, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1974), where she poetically paints a picture of how Black women, though often silenced and prevented from expressing their voice and showcasing their talents, liberate themselves and others through the

artistic expressions of their lived experiences most commonly showcased through narratives and storytelling. The legacy of our mothers, grandmothers, and all of the Black women who came before us are encoded into the fabric of our being. Through her use of prose, Walker demonstrates how the legacy of their work are the seeds they planted and sowed just for us. Their stories of struggle and resistance that remain undocumented get processed and translated though us. The heritage that we share, the strength that we pass down and to others laterally. Engulfed in the work of their lives is where true forms of artistic production can be found, despite the restrictions imposed by racism and subjugation. Emphasizing the importance of recognizing and valuing the creative contributions of Black women, in "Art on My Mind: Visual Politics" bell hooks (1995) argues that art and cultural production can serve as a form of resistance and disruption, especially for those who have been historically excluded from traditional artistic canons as they have important contributions to make to our cultural landscape.

Our constructed realities are heavily reliant on the artistic production of our mothers; the legacy of possibility for all that she was able to do in a world that explicitly and perpetually reifies our existence with finite possibilities. We are able to discover and understand ourselves, and transform the world beyond ourselves, through the recognition and understanding of them (our mothers, that is). We see the relevance of artistic expression and production again over four decades later in scholar Shelly Eversley's *The Evidence of Things Unseen* (2018) when she uses Carlene Hatcher Polite's novel *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* to investigate Black women's experimental writing. Eversley discusses the absence of Black women's creative and critical contributions to and about experimental literature, the avant-garde, and the ways in which the narratives of Black women disrupt and challenge linear formulations of knowledge and history that shape Black humanity and Black existence. For Eversley, the imposition of realism in Black literature helps to enforce a static notion of Blackness as authenticity, an argument that she has made in other contexts (Eversley, 1998), just as I attempt, in the context

of this dissertation, to tease out this authenticity in Black women's leadership practices as tool for disruption and radical change in their communities.

According to historian Darlene Clark Hine (1998), Black women in the 1970s and 1980s searched for their place in the politics of race and gender. This wasn't simply a reaction to the women's liberation movement and the negligence of acknowledging the Black women within it; it was also a response to the hypermasculinity of the civil rights, Black power, and Black arts movements (Dubey, 1994). The gender politics of these movements spawned a number of radical voices that have become the foundation of Black feminism (Eversley, 2018). For example, Toni Cade Bambara (1970) edited a text in Black women's studies - *The Black Woman: An Anthology* - that included short stories, poetry, and essays by Black female intellectuals as a tool of liberation. Now iconic writings by Maya Angelou (1970), Mari Evans (1970), Toni Morrison (1970), and Alice Walker (1970) all aimed at highlighting the experiences of Black women in everyday life tightly bound toward achieving some semblance of voice, solidarity, and liberation, especially of the mind, were birthed from that moment. This moment gave rise to Black feminist criticism, a discourse on the intellectual critique of the writings of Black women. The tradition of Black feminist criticism has created the conditions for other critical stances that have emerged from Black queer studies to Black masculinities studies (Eversley, 2018). In the 1990s and 2000s, Black women continued to struggle with intersectional issues related to race, gender, and class. Scholars have noted that during this period, Black women faced unique challenges in their homes and in the world as a result of the rise of neoliberal policies (Melamed, 2011), the war on drugs (Alexander, 2010), and the criminalization of Black bodies (Davis, 2003; Roberts, 2014). During this period, we see the emergence of key theories such as BFT (Collins, 1990) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) not only as a means of better understanding the experiences and perspectives of Black women but to challenge narratives and power structures that directly impact the life chances and outcomes of Black people. The origins and evolution of Black Feminist Thought and its tenets

are equally rooted in this practice which has paved the way for scholars such as Hardaway, Ward, and Howell (2019) who used Black Feminist Thought as an analytical framework to examine violence and erasure in education. They examined the legal and policy discourses that shape and inform institutional responses to campus violence towards undergraduate Black womyn at historically white institutions and the disproportionality in the meeting out of disciplinary measures for Black girls. Through their use of a theoretical essay, they also explored how both disciplinary and legal practices disregard intersectional identities, resulting in the prioritization of whiteness while simultaneously rendering Black girls and womyn invisible. At the root of this work, there is a fundamental belief in Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1995) argument that womyn[3] of color experience racially gendered violence because of policies that fail to take their intersectional identities into account. Addressing this policy issue in education, Hardaway et al., uses the core BFT tenets of intersectionality and jurisprudence of resistance (Alexander-Floyd, 2010; Collins, 1990) to argue for a transformative legal approach that centers Black womyn legal thinkers who have created approaches and solutions to problems that extend the traditional canon of law to address historically marginalized and minoritized citizens' societal ills (Alexander-Floyd, 2010; Harris, 1992). The centering of Black womyn and other womyn of color in the policy process, challenging intellectual spaces such as institutions of higher education and the legal actors frame to contend with Black womyn's realities, and an overall systemic examination of discipline, violence, and controlling images of Black girls and womyn in educational settings are all major offerings available to be leveraged through the use of this framework.

Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical framework is an important and useful consideration because I deeply desire my work to result in transformative policy practices both

[3] I have continued to use "womyn" throughout the rest of this paragraph because it directly speaks to racially gendered-based violence. Throughout this dissertation, I will make an attempt to do the same when I am specifically referring to racially gendered violence, as to not have to center men in the text. Women and womyn will be used interchangeably.

in community and government. Assata Shakur (1987) once said, “Theory without practice is just as incomplete as practice without theory. The two have to go together.” I truly and fundamentally believe this to be true, as the work of Black women is often entangled with a deeper ontological project. For far too long, the perspectives and bodies of Black women have been excluded from the process of policy formation despite the implementation of which having deleterious consequences for them and their communities (Hardaway et al., 2019). Even when their bodies are included in the process, it is expected that their perspectives, generated from their lived experiences, will be left at the door. This is especially true when they don’t align with dominant narratives and modes of thinking. Black Feminist Thought can help us envision and reconceptualize how we understand the role of research in policy and the practical strategies of engagement that make sense and are accessible for those most harmed, especially given Collins’s (1989) articulation of experience as a form of knowledge. It provides a language and vocabulary for what I've experienced and know to be true but without having to compromise or contend with the issues that I’m problematizing in a vacuum. Moreover, the level of intellectual fortitude and rigor is far more critical than most theoretical frameworks taken up to study policy because it includes a multidimensional lens that makes room for the examination of multiple systemic oppression simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1990). In addition to the intrinsic value of its liberatory nature for Black women because of the constitution of our lived experience, the offerings of BFT include: the alternative production and validation of knowledge; enhancing the possibilities of being able to shape policy into something with more equitable processes and outcomes by way of considering intersecting identities and centering the voices of those most harmed or likely to be impacted; leveraging alternative perspectives and experiences to organize and mobilize as a strategy to inform and influence policy; political contributions of addressing multiple forms of systemic oppression simultaneously through advocacy and coalition building; and increasing the visibility, self-determination, and collective consciousness of Black women through storytelling and narrative shaping, is the sensemaking needed to

transform the policy process. All of the offerings listed above contribute to this sensemaking of helping others understand their built environment in a way that is both meaningful and conductive of and to their contributions to policy processes and policy outcomes.

As the Co-Founder & Executive Director of the Black Researchers Collective[4], a Black-led research organization with explicit goals around policy, it is important that the community we engage with can make sense of policy to and for themselves. Not community engagement as its conventionally understood in the academy with an integration of community into the academic priorities of the university (Stanton, 1999; Saltmarsh et al., 2009) but a level of engagement that encourages community ownership and authorship over the process. It's crucial that they see themselves as an intangible component of a process that was never meant for them to begin with. It is essential that they see the value of their personal assets and contribution as levers of change and begin to activate around those levers accordingly. BFT offers a framework that informs us that we don't have to see ourselves outside of a system deeply impacting us as others do but instead challenges us to pave a lane or build a seat at the table so that everyone can eat. All of these offerings may have implications for policy change. Imagine how different the policy landscape might be with communities at the helm. It doesn't involve rote or passive participation but instead requires a level of active engagement needed for sustainability and longevity.

For the love of Black women

The love, care, and generosity of Black women has been taken for granted. Their love, our love, has been historically subjected to scrutiny, erasure, and marginalization in our homes, schools, and places of work. There are very few places that feel like home to us. Our bodies have been subjected to violence and degradation, and our labor has been exploited (Hartman, 2016). The beauty of our Blackness and womanhood is often undermined yet we keep putting

[4] www.blackresearcherscollective.com

our best foot forward, seeking a place of refuge, a site to be seen and understood. Thankfully, within the realm of BFT and radical Black feminisms, the love and relationships of Black women are understood as deeply political and critical sites of resistance against the intersectional oppression we face based on our race, gender, class, and sexual identities (McKittrick, 2007). This often manifests in the work that we do in the world, organizationally and otherwise. Speaking to this resilience, in *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle*, Katherine McKittrick (2006) writes “Despite the omnipresent reach of slavers and their instruments of power, Black women forged new practices of humanity that were about ‘restoring the conditions of their own lives" (p. 18). Just as many other spaces are today for Black women, "Slave ships were sites of political resistance, places of communal practice, and spaces of human agency" (p. 17). Within the context of both interconnected theories, as previously mentioned, BFT help us understand the lives of Black women and the structural and systemic racism that they face, recognizing that Black women simultaneously experience multiple forms of oppression while the more radical form of Black feminism seeks to challenge and dismantle oppressive social systems and institutions. This includes challenging white supremacy and patriarchy, as well as capitalism and colonialism. Both are necessary for the full participation of Black women in the ecosystem of life.

Black Feminist Thought, first articulated by scholars such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, highlights the ways in which the experiences and perspectives of Black women are distinct from both mainstream feminist movements and Black male-centered movements (hooks, 1981; Collins, 1990). Within this framework, we find love. We find that Black women's love, in particular, is seen as a crucial site of resistance against systems of oppression, as it provides a space for healing, nurturing, and the creation of alternative visions of community and relationships (hooks, 1981). Similarly, radical Black feminisms, such as those put forth by scholars like Angela Davis and Audre Lorde, argue that Black women's love and relationships must be understood within the larger context of global systems of power and oppression (Davis,

1981; Lorde, 1984). These feminisms call for a radical reimagining of love and relationships that challenges the dominant heteronormative, patriarchal, and capitalist ideologies that shape our understanding of intimate relationships (Davis, 1981).

At the heart of both of these theories is the idea that Black women's love is essential to our fight against systemic racism and oppression. Black women have long been at the forefront of the fight for social justice, and their love, care, and support for one another have been essential to the movement. Black women's love has been expressed in various ways, such as through grassroots organizing, activism, and protest. Black women's love for one another has provided a sense of safety, community, and solidarity in the face of oppression and violence. Black Feminist Thought and radical Black feminism both recognize that, in order to effectively challenge oppressive systems and institutions, Black women must be heard and supported. This includes actively engaging in conversations about systemic racism and oppression, and advocating for the rights and needs of Black women.

For Black womyn, love is often a site of resistance against the various forms of violence we experience, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and police brutality (Smith, 2009). As such, Black women's love and relationships can be seen as a form of political activism, as they challenge dominant narratives of Black women as hypersexualized, devalued, and disposable (Collins, 1990). Our love, something to be celebrated, serves as a space for the creation and maintenance of community and support networks, which are crucial in the face of systemic racism and sexism (hooks, 1981). Both theories emphasize the importance of creating and nurturing safe and affirming spaces for Black women to gather and express themselves. This includes creating communities of care and support which can provide a sense of belonging and empowerment for Black women.

The relationship between black women's love, Black Feminist Thought, and radical Black feminism is one of mutual support and solidarity. Black women's love has been essential to the fight against systemic racism and oppression, and in turn, Black Feminist Thought and radical

Black feminism provides a framework for understanding, challenging, and transforming these oppressive systems that bind us. Ultimately, both of these theories recognize that our love is an integral part of the struggle for social justice and liberation. By foregrounding the experiences and perspectives of Black women, movements can challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative visions of love, relationships, and organization work that are grounded in justice and equity. Moreover, we must understand and acknowledge the unique experiences and perspectives of Black women in order to build a more just and equitable world (Hartman, 2016).

Black organizers and Black-led organizations

Many Black leaders in organizations working along the margins share a mindset and values similar to that of the late great civil rights activist Ella Baker, who "understood that laws, structures, and institutions had to change in order to correct injustice and oppression, but part of the process had to involve oppressed people, ordinary people, infusing new meanings into the concept of democracy and finding their own individual and collective power to determine their lives and shape the direction of history (Ransby, 2003, p. 15)." Understanding this, many of us (Black leaders) recognize that real change cannot come unless those of us who have been most harmed are standing at the center of the resolution. Sometimes standing at the center can be dangerous but it is also simultaneously courageous because we often speak remembering that we were never meant to survive (Lorde, 1978). After all, race in the context of this work is also a political category, an inherently productive set of sociopolitical processes that Alexander Weheliye refers to as "racializing assemblages" because they discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans (Weheliye, 2014), resulting in the formal othering of black bodies with sentiments of anti-blackness through seemingly race neutral policies. Racial identities are always the product of social processes defined by difference and hierarchy.

Black organizers and Black-led organizations have often mobilized in response to biopolitics (Weheliye, 2014) or political violence based on these processes, essentially state-sponsored decisions about which lives and deaths matter. We saw much of these grassroots efforts get amplified in 2020 through racial uprisings and racial reckonings across the country in response to biopower and biopolitics to stop Black deaths and end Black suffering. Biopower as we understand it from Michele Foucault constitutes a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death (Foucault, 1900), propagated through regulatory controls of the state aimed at the subjugation of bodies and population control which we can best be understood as biopolitics (Adams, 2017). For Foucault, biopolitics is a transformation of the politics concerned with sovereign judicial power that primarily rested on the power to take life or let live (Foucault, 1900). However, given that biopolitics and race are both inextricably linked to capitalism, the struggle against biopolitics in this context is posed as a Black feminist critique of the discourse led by philosophers such as Foucault and Giorgio Agamben (1998), although for Agamben much of this happens in a state of exception, who argued that people being killed but not sacrificed is modus operandi in a system designed to weld control over the collective (bare life), neither of which give credence to the value and political significance of race that permeates through the fabric of everyday life.

In *Represent and Destroy*, Jodi Melamed (2011) investigates the extension of that permeation through official antiracist regimes, describes the unification provided for state-capital formations, and makes the case that these official antiracist regimes (racial liberalism (mid-1940s to 1960s), liberal multiculturalism (1980s to 1990s), neoliberal multiculturalism (2000s)) have fatally limited the possibility of overcoming racism to the mechanisms of U.S.-led global capitalism, even as they have enabled new kinds of normalizing and rationalizing violence. If antiracist regimes have strongly shaped and determined the limits of social possibility through systems of thinking, politics, and practice, Black organizers and Black-led organizations must consider their role in disrupting the prescribed limits of social possibilities and be wary of the

convenience of liberal-leaning solutions in their fight for liberation. We must consider our demands, what we're bargaining, and giving up in exchange for the illusion of inclusion. For example, in the aftermath of the racial uprisings of 2020, as result of the continuous killings of unarmed Black bodies at the hands of the state, we saw, in real time, police departments all across the nation make a commitment to increasing multicultural representation as part of their "reform" efforts to make sure that more of the police on the streets reflect the demographics of the communities that they're patrolling. However, this representation didn't and doesn't do anything to change the harmful, anti-black, white supremacist structures of policing that constantly yield the same conditions and outcomes for Black communities. Instead, we've seen the darkening of white supremacy, or white supremacy in Blackface, where Black bodies are still dying by the hands of the police but the face of police is now Black, perpetuating a narrative that takes the spotlight off of white officers yet still doesn't address the pervasiveness of white supremacy in structures of policing. Evidence of this can be seen in the recent killing of unarmed Black man Tyre Nichols[5] in January 2023 who was beaten to his ultimate death from his sustained injuries at the hands of five Black Memphis police officers, at least two of whom were hired in 2020. White supremacy doesn't need white actors and white institutions to advance itself, it only requires cooperation, which is how such a horrendous incident can happen in a majority Black city with Black leadership at the helm (Taylor, 2016).

We also observed, in real time, police departments across the nation, but especially here in Chicago, accosting Black organizers and Black-led organizations (at least this was my lived experiences, and that of the comrades that I build solidarity efforts in community with) to serve on their advisory councils and contribute to their virtual suggestion boxes about how they can better work with community, a gesture that went largely unfulfilled for Black communities because policing policies and practices remain unchanged, and in some cases, exacerbated.

[5] https://www.npr.org/2023/02/17/1157756023/memphis-tyre-nichols-police-officers-court-charges

There is a thin line between inclusion in the policy environment to change everyday conditions for Black people from just regular ol' inclusion in the same systems and processes that subjugate and oppress our people yet, as BLOs, to some extent, we are still forced to interact with and engage oppressive systems to access what we need. Many Black organizers and BLOs are not unaware of this; they are simply navigating through a muddy path to figure out how to best advance our collective community priorities without exposing our communities to additional harms. This dissertation amplifies the contributions that Black women have made in a neoliberal multicultural environment to that end, where it's not enough to just focus on the representation of Black people but the values, politics, interests, and collective consciousness of Black people as well. These values, politics, interests, and collective consciousness means are essential to resisting while working within and external to oppressive structures. This tension is illuminated through the work of abolitionist feminists. For example, in *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation,* Beth Richie (2012) writes that "Abolition feminism is about imagining a world without punishment and containment, a world where communities are safe and secure because they are self-determined, and because they have the resources and the support necessary to address the issues that arise within them." In the context of this study, Black women are creating new conditions for safe environments on their blocks and in the communities that don't require them to rely on structures of violence that profit on the killing of the black body but instead on the nourishment of our whole being.

Much of the grassroots efforts in recent years led by Black organizers and Black-led organizations were and are continuously made possible through the Black radical tradition of collective consciousness, constantly being developed and informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality (Robinson, 2000); an experience unique to Black people, particularly those concerned with and fighting for liberation. Though not always exclusive to or exclusively for Black bodies, healing circles, Black only workshops and trainings for political education,

capital boycotts, expressway shutdowns, sit-ins, die-ins, hunger strikes, and community-based mutual aid supply chains are all examples of grassroots efforts both resistant or intentionally oppositional to our colonial way of being in service of the preservation of Black life. The theoretical underpinnings of Black radicalism can be articulated through the efforts of intellectuals such as William Edward Burkhardt Du Bois, Cyril Lionel Robert James, and Richard Nathaniel Wright who helped advance a nuanced understanding of Black struggle through the lens of Marxism, each articulating their own experiences of organized opposition to racism, exploitation, and domination in distinct and meaningful ways that inspire collective Black resistance (Robinson, 2000). W.E.B. Du Bois spoke to "double consciousness", the internal conflict that Black people who are forced to navigate both their own identity and the expectations and prejudices of white society (1903), and the political and economic power struggles and role of Black resistance and activism during the period of Black Reconstruction (1935). C.L.R. James challenges the notion that European colonizers were inherently superior to those who they colonized, and highlights the importance of Black resistance and solidarity (1938), and elevates critiques of capitalism and imperialism that have relevance for contemporary struggles against these systems (1953). Through Richard Wright's writings, he analyzes systemic racism and poverty in America (1940) and highlights the power of education, resistance, and self-determination in overcoming oppression (1945).

Black struggle even extends beyond electoral politics, making it nearly impossible to address effectively without a deep examination of the effects of systemic racism which is why a Black liberation movement was made possible under the umbrella of Black Lives Matter on the watch of the nation's first Black president (Taylor, 2016). Jordan Camp (2016) argues that "activists, artists, and intellectuals are currently playing prominent public roles in reclaiming a collective memory of freedom struggles — shared perceptions about the history of social movements that are sparking the imagination of political struggles in the present, and articulating the poetry of the future" (p. 20). These roles and reclamation are necessary given

that the transition to neoliberalism has led to extreme polarizations of wealth, an expanding planet of slums, and the formation of the largest carceral state on the planet (Camp, 2016). The work of Black organizers and Black-led organizations is about creating sociomaterial equity, depolarizing wealth, eradicating poverty, and abolishing carceral systems. The work of Black organizers and Black-led organizations is a labor of love, a liberation project, a journey toward liberation. "We [literally] do this 'til we free us" (Kaba & Murakawa 2021). We do this because we know that no one is going to do it for us, and we recognize that if we want to be saved, we must save ourselves...on our own terms and within our own guidelines and parameters.

Black-led organizations as spaces of resistance

Black-led organizations have been the forerunners of resistance movements against systemic oppression and injustice for centuries. These organizations have provided spaces for Black people to come together and create communities that are centered around healing, support, and empowerment. By recognizing the interconnectedness of systemic oppression, including racism, sexism, and capitalism, many Black-led organizations are working to challenge dominant narratives and create alternative frameworks that prioritize the needs of our communities. One key way that Black-led organizations have resisted systemic oppression is through their focus on healing justice. Interestingly, many of our organizations are doing this without even having the language or literature of the framework to do so. It is simply rooted in the needs of our lived experiences and strategies for resistance.

Healing justice is a framework that recognizes the ways in which systemic violence and trauma impact people and communities and works to address these impacts through community-based approaches and culturally responsive practices (Bosley et al., 2022). It is a holistic approach to justice that focuses on addressing the root causes of violence and trauma, rather than just the symptoms. It seeks to provide restorative justice, by emphasizing collective liberation and healing, as well as structural transformation. Healing justice is an alternative to

traditional punitive justice systems, in that it focuses on addressing the root causes of harm, restoring relationships, and promoting personal and community wellness (Pyles, 2020). This framework is rooted in the understanding that oppression is not just about microlevel acts of violence, but about the macro and systemic ways in which people and communities are impacted by systemic injustices. It promotes Black healing, and Black healing is a political issue to be prioritized, as it is connected to the larger movement for racial justice (Green et al., 2018). Healing justice offers a pipeline for this possibility.

Black-led organizations are integral and necessary to this approach, as they provide a space for us to come together and fight for our own liberation. Black-led organizations are often the trailblazers in leading healing justice work because they understand the ways in which systemic violence directly impacts our communities. Through these organizations, people leverage their stories and experiences, which can be used to help inform and shape the development of healing justice frameworks. For example, many Black-led organizations in Chicago prioritize the well-being, support, and protection to Black girls (i.e., A Long Walk Home[6], Assata's Daughters[7], Polished Pebbles[8]) as a form of healing justice, recognizing that Black womyn and girls are disproportionately impacted by sexual violence and that this violence is intertwined with other forms of oppression that are subject to over-policing and criminalization (Crenshaw et al., 2015). These organizations work to create alternative narratives around healing and justice that prioritize the needs and perspectives of Black survivors, pertaining to various forms of violence against us, challenging dominant narratives that often silence and dismiss our experiences.

In addition, Black-led organizations work to challenge the criminal legal system, which has historically been used as a tool of oppression against Black communities (Alexander, 2010).

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[6] https://www.alongwalkhome.org/

[7] https://www.assatasdaughters.org/

[8] https://polishedpebbles.com/

By advocating for alternatives to incarceration, such as community-based healing programs and transformative justice, these organizations resist the criminalization of Blackness and Black bodies while they work to create a fairer system, one that yields more equitable outcomes. Black-led organizations also create spaces of resistance through our focus on community building and empowerment. Black-led organizations can provide a platform for healing justice to take place and serve as a space for trauma-informed healing through collective liberation. Healing justice frameworks are crucial in sustaining Black lives because they address the root causes of systemic oppression (Hemphill, 2017). As a result, it has policy-relevant significance and implications. By creating safe and supportive spaces for Black people to come together, organizations engage in collective healing which is necessary to address systemic trauma (Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, 2020). Through community building and organizing, Black-led organizations work to create the conditions for resistance, resilience, and healing. Through the prioritization of Black community needs and perspectives, these organizations can serve as societal models to challenge dominant narratives and create spaces for healing, support, and empowerment. Through their focus on healing justice and community building, Black-led organizations are essential to the ongoing struggle for justice and liberation. Though not always recognized, Black-led organizations are powerful tools of social change. The unification of people and organization of movement building activities can challenge oppressive systems and create the necessary conditions for healing justice to take place. Through this, people can be empowered to take control of their lives and fight for their own liberation.

On a further note, there are not many studies that explore how Black-led organizations in the U.S., notwithstanding the lack of adequate resources to support their work, attempt to inform, influence, and shape policy. For example, Shena Ashley and Susan Taylor Batten (2017) examined the role of Black-led organizations in social change efforts, with a focus on their interactions with philanthropic organizations. Conducting interviews with leaders of Black-led organizations, philanthropic organizations, and experts in the field to explore the challenges

and opportunities faced by Black-led organizations in engaging with philanthropy, they argued that Black-led organizations are often underfunded and face unique challenges in engaging with philanthropy, but also have valuable insights and expertise on issues affecting Black communities. Andra Gillespie and Candis Watts Smith (2019) examined the strategies and effectiveness of Black-led organizations in three U.S. cities - Atlanta, Baltimore, and Detroit - in advancing policy change on issues such as criminal justice reform and economic development. Through conducting interviews with leaders of Black-led organizations and analyzing policy documents and news coverage to identify the strategies used by organizations and the impact of their effort, they argued that Black-led organizations have unique insights and strengths in building coalitions and mobilizing communities, but also face challenges in accessing resources and sustaining their efforts. As a result, Black-led organizations are often not taken seriously or considered a relevant stakeholder in the policy space. They are often not invested in beyond the immediate and short-term value of their programmatic offerings and direct service opportunities to the community.

While there is incredible value here, these efforts cannot produce long-term sustainable outcomes on their own. Substantive investment in strategies that directly connect to levers of structural and institutional power such as policymaking is required as well. I chose to focus on Black-led organizations because I argue that there is something unique about the collective political and material struggle of Black people, globally but particularly in the United States, that make us well-positioned and strategically qualified based on our lived empirical experiences to examine, deconstruct, and reimagine policy that disproportionately affect our life chances and everyday lives. Within this presumption, I also argue that Black women, based on our collective marginalized identities of being Black and woman, negotiate and navigate policy-relevant priorities in alignment with the expertise of our lived experiences to strategically advance an agenda toward the liberation of all people. Men who negotiate and navigate priorities in similar ways are deeply influenced by Black women who execute in this particular way.

Cultural attributes as a means of survival

Cultural attributes, which I also acknowledge as assets, as articulated through language, customs, traditions, and values, can serve as powerful tools for survival in the face of oppressive systems. They provide a sense of identity, community, and continuity that can be used to resist and challenge the dominant narratives that aim to marginalize and eradicate Black communities. As Black women, we have an ancestral connection to our resistance. McKittrick et al., (2019) explored this connection through ancestral trauma and contemporary resistance among Black communities in the United States. The authors argued that the ongoing resistance and resilience of Black people against racial oppression can be traced back to the trauma and resistance of our ancestors who were subjected to slavery, segregation, and other forms of racial violence. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic observations with Black activists and community leaders, McKittrick et al., (2019) found that many of them described their resistance as a continuation of the struggle that their ancestors endured. They noted that the memories and legacies of slavery and other forms of oppression were passed down through generations, shaping the identity and worldview of Black people and informing their resistance. Recognizing, honoring, and acknowledging our ancestral connections to resistance are key to our survival and work on the ground, from contemporary movements to mobilizing communities in the struggle for justice and liberation.

Abolitionist feminism plays a role in this resistance by seeking to challenge and dismantle systems of oppression — including patriarchy, racism, and the prison industrial complex — because they recognize the intersectional nature of these systems. Abolitionist and feminist frameworks can help address and resist systems of oppression, including the prison-industrial complex, police brutality, and state-sanctioned violence against BIPOC communities (Davis et al., 2022). For abolitionist scholars Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie, intersectional identities shape our experiences of oppression so a combined abolitionist-feminist approach can better address these issues. They understand that oppression is woven

into the fabric of society and maintained by institutions and policies (Crenshaw, 2013). Abolitionist feminism, therefore, calls for a holistic and systemic approach to resistance and change as a means of survival. Beyond survival, and similar to healing justice frameworks, these principles and practices can support healing in restoration in our communities (Kaba, 2001).

Abolitionist feminism, in particular, recognizes the importance of cultural attributes in the struggle for justice and freedom. Cultural attributes that pertain to race, gender, class, and sexuality, have forms of oppression and privilege. As a result, abolitionist feminism understands that cultural attributes are central to understanding the ways in which communities are affected by systems of oppression. This recognition is reflected in the work of scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw, who has argued for the need to examine the intersections of race and gender, and Jael Silliman, who has written about the importance of addressing the intersections of gender, sexuality, and violence in the struggle for abolition. Aya de Leon has also explored the role of cultural attributes in shaping Black feminism and the struggle for justice while Fredricka Roberts analyzes the role of the Black Women's Club Movement in advancing social, political, and economic rights for Black women during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and their strategic use of cultural attributes, such as respectability and motherhood, as tools of resistance and survival for Black women during that period. Through each of their works, abolitionist feminists underscore the importance of recognizing the ways in which cultural attributes intersect and influence experiences of oppression and privilege, and the importance of centering the experiences and perspectives of communities.

Cultural attributes can play a crucial role in this resistance by providing a foundation for community-building and solidarity. For example, language can be used to articulate and express experiences and narratives that challenge dominant cultural myths and stereotypes (Chioneso et al., 2020). Traditions, customs, and values can provide a sense of belonging and continuity, and can be used to resist cultural assimilation and erasure (Alexander et al., 2004).

Furthermore, cultural attributes can serve as a source of resilience and healing. They can provide a space for communities to process trauma and grief, and create narratives of hope and transformation (Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, 2020). In this way, cultural attributes can be used to cultivate and sustain resilience, which is critical in the face of ongoing oppression and trauma (Green et al., 2018). The intersectional nature of oppression and the importance of cultural attributes, offers a framework, through abolitionist feminisms, for using these tools to challenge and dismantle systems of oppression and create pathways for healing and justice.

Black liberation as Afrofuturism

Afrofuturism is a cultural movement that imagines a future in which Black people are free from oppression and able to create their own narratives and realities (Bambara, 1980; Tate, 1992; Butler, 1993, Dery, 1994). Afrofuturism is all about possibilities. Contemporary writers of Afrofuturism still leverage science fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, magical realism, technology, music, and art to explore issues of race, identity, power, and social justice (Anderson and Jones, 2013; Nelson, 2016; Womack, 2013; Gaskins et al., 2019). For example, Ytasha Womack (2013) defines Afrofuturism as “a way of imagining possible futures through a Black cultural lens.” Kara Keeling (2019) argues that Afrofuturism is “a way of imagining a future that is queer, feminist, and antiracist” and uses science fiction, fantasy, and other genres to challenge dominant narratives and imagine alternative futures. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles Jones (2013) propose a manifesto for Afrofuturism that emphasizes the importance of science fiction and other speculative genres in “reimagining and reconstructing the past, present, and future of the African diaspora.” Bell hooks (1993), in “Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery,” includes Afrofuturism as a form of “imaginative inquiry” that Black women use to “move beyond the constraints of lived experience and discover new possibilities for living.”

To this end, when I think of Black liberation and Afrofuturism, I virtually see them as one in the same, as they both concern the future of the Black community. Conceptually, they both focus on the empowerment and liberation of Black people from white supremacy and systemic oppression. Black liberation is a broad term often used to refer to the pursuit of various freedoms for Black people. For Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2017) to The Combahee River Collective, Black liberation is the struggle to dismantle all forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic exploitation. The Combahee River Collective saw Black liberation as inextricably linked to the liberation of all oppressed peoples. Audre Lorde (2007) saw Black liberation as a political and social movement that seeks to dismantle all forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. She argued that Black women must take an active role in the movement and fight against the intersectional oppression they face. Angela Davis (2016) argued that Black liberation must be understood as part of a broader struggle against all forms of oppression and highlighted the need to build coalitions across different social justice movements. Mikki Kendall (2020) argued that Black liberation must include a focus on issues such as poverty, food insecurity, and access to healthcare, in addition to issues such as police brutality and mass incarceration. The distinctions between these definitions are apparent with Black liberation deliberately focused on structures and systems change.

Despite the literature-based distinctions, I personally see the alignment between Afrofuturism and Black liberation because Black liberation is a political and social movement that seeks to challenge systemic racism. Afrofuturism, as a cultural movement, emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the limited representation of Black people in popular culture (Barber et al., 2015). The movement envisioned a future in which Black people are not just survivors of oppression, but are actively shaping our own destinies. Afrofuturism is an artistic and cultural movement that incorporates elements of science fiction, fantasy, and speculative

fiction to imagine a future in which Black people are free from racism and other forms of systemic oppression (Womack, 2013).

In contrast to the bleak and dystopian futures often portrayed in mainstream science fiction and Afropessimism, which considers anti-Blackness as foundational to modernity and Black suffering inevitable (Wilderson, 2020), Afrofuturism offers a vision of a future that is grounded in the aspirations and dreams of Black people. By imagining a future in which Black people are free from oppression and able to create their own narratives, Afrofuturism is a powerful tool for Black liberation (Anderson, 2016). As articulated through the definitions and work of scholars mentioned at the beginning of this section, it provides a space for Black people to imagine a future that is not limited by their current circumstances and to explore the possibilities for a more equitable and just world. However, Afrofuturism is not just about imagining a better future; it is also about creating a better present. By imagining and creating new worlds, Afrofuturists are creating new ways of thinking about the world and about the future. They are challenging the dominant narratives of what is possible and what is desirable and creating new narratives that are rooted in the experiences and aspirations of Black people. This is particularly important in a world where Black people are often marginalized and excluded from mainstream narratives.

In both Black liberation and Afrofuturism, the past and present are seen as important sources of inspiration for imagining new and better futures. Black liberation and Afrofuturism are related in their shared focus on Black experiences, perspectives, and futures. Both movements challenge the notion that the future is predetermined and instead assert that it is a product of the choices and actions of people. This means that the work of Black liberation and Afrofuturism is inherently linked, as the fight for Black liberation is not just about undoing the harm of the past but also imagining and creating new possibilities for the future. Taken together, these movements have the power to imagine and create a world in which Black people are truly free and able to achieve their full potential. In Mark Dery's (1994) article "Black to the Future", he

poses the question “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” Just as Derry argues, the answer is yes, though I go beyond science fiction and ground Dery in the everyday struggles of Black women who are simultaneously imagining and building toward the future they seek in the present moment because they believe it’s possible. The lack of imagination of others around us thwarts progress in real time.

Chapter Three
Methodology

"You catch more bees with honey than vinegar." — Mama LaVerne (aka Glenance's mom)

Introduction

In the last chapter, I acknowledged the need to center the everyday struggles of Black women who are simultaneously imagining and building toward our Afrofuturist reality. Given this need, this dissertation studied Black women's perspectives and experiences leading Black-led organizations (BLOs). By excavating these perspectives and experiences through interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, I came to better understand how BLOs led by Black women have worked toward Black liberation in Chicago. Through this fieldwork, I examined, codified, and studied the ideologies, cultural decision-making, practices, and outputs of BLOs led by Black women, which can inform the future work of other such Black-led organizations and Black women leaders.

I came to this research study because I recognized that most the readily accessible and highly valued research on Black women's leadership in organizations—with the exception of that which is done by other Black women—is related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and predominantly focused on white spaces (Cox & Blake, 1991; Jackson & Ruderman, 1995). Most often, Black women are lumped in with other people of color and illuded to within the context of cultural diversity more broadly. In "Searching for the invisible woman", Jill King (2018) conducted a historical analysis of Black women educational leadership, arguing that their contributions have often been overlooked or undervalued within the field. She acknowledges that much of the existing research on women in leadership has focused on white women, and that there is a need for more attention to the experiences of women of color, particularly Black women. Although some of the research that has been conducted does champion the case for more Black women in leadership, as King's article does above, much of it still centers whiteness and prioritizes white agendas. In the Erica Bell's (2019) article, "The role of Black women in the

workplace," she discussed that much of the existing research on workplace diversity centers whiteness and prioritizes white agendas, and that there is a need for more attention to the experiences of Black women. She highlights the resilience and strength of Black women and advocates for greater recognition and inclusion of their voices and perspectives in research and policy-making. This is one of the reasons why I felt it was so important to center Black women in my research. Rooted in Black Feminist Thought, I came to this research study knowing the importance of centering Black women in my research, as it was developed as a response to the exclusion and marginalization within both feminist and anti-racist movements (Collins, 2000). BFT provides a unique perspective on power, knowledge, and social change, and offers insights into the experiences of Black women that are often overlooked by mainstream feminist and anti-racist discourse. I have had the pleasure and privilege of observing the work of Black women my entire life. I have even leveled up my own leadership practices over the years as a result of watching how they lead. I have found the leadership of Black women to be perpetually smooth like honey, even when their tongues cut deep. They have rooted their practices in an Afrofuturist vision of hope and gift wrapped it to the world with love. My practices and orientation to organizational work don't fall too far from this tree.

It was my vision of hope and love for my people that brought me to the metaphoric doorsteps of Angelique Power, the former President of the Field Foundation of Illinois and first Black woman selected to lead that organization, in 2019. I remember sitting in her office, peering out at the city from her big glass windows, as we discussed some of the work that I had been doing, the things that I had be wrestling with as Black woman in the world, and the ways in which I could use some of my research skills and policy relevant interests to master a practice that doesn't just exist in theory from a classroom, but is rooted in community as a recipe for change. We discussed the potential for well-funded community initiatives outside of the parameters of a nonprofit organization and how this could fit in the context of my dissertation which was on the horizon. At that point, I had been in my doctoral program for five years. I had

just returned to the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) after being on a two-year hiatus to do arts-based liberation organizing work in the wake of the Trump administration era; I was struggling to land on the right set of priorities for the value of what felt like was an exorbitant amount of time to complete my dissertation research. I was adamant about not wasting my time doing anything that wouldn't yield a positive impact on my community. Moreover, I wanted my dissertation to be directly tied to my life's work. Though it did not neatly fit into the specific funding priorities of Field, Angelique was interested, saw the value as another Black woman, and put me in touch with her Leadership Development Program Officer, Hilesh Patel. I remember the day I ended up having a conversation with Hilesh. I was on the phone with him walking in circles around in my living room, bearing the vision of my soul, when he said, "Wow, I literally just had the exact same conversation with Shari Runner. Do you know Shari Runner?" Turns out, Shari had the same conversation with both Hilesh and Angelique. Go figure! Of course I knew who she was. Well, I didn't *know* her, but I certainly knew *of* her. She was the former President and CEO of the Chicago Urban League[9] for many years and was a bit of a local celebrity (I always tell her that, which she absolutely hates but I get a kick out of it anyway because it's true) and her family has really been a staple of Black excellence in the community for a long time. Her father was a well-known (and one of very few) Black pediatrician in the city, Dr. Charles Runner, who provided top-notch care from Bronzeville during a time when Black folks would not been seen by doctors outside of our community. The values that Shari held were rooted in care and love, just as mine. Hilesh connected us, and on Friday, September 13, 2019 we met for lunch outside on the homemade street patio of Pizza Capri in Hyde Park. As we discussed our collective vision for the research-policy-practice relationship, skills, and value orientation toward the work, we instantaneously knew that we were meant to birth something together. As we wrapped up our lunch, energized from the conversation that we had, we knew

[9] https://chiul.org/

that it couldn't stop there. Preparing to leave, I turned to Shari and said, we should start a Black researchers collective. She laughed and replied, "But I don't know any Black researchers." Shari was an advocate and lover of research but spent much of her career in the business world of banking. I smiled and said that I knew plenty. That was the birth of the Black Researchers Collective.

In the months that followed, I spent time curating a small group Black women researchers who I knew and loved: those with diverse backgrounds and perspectives, who possessed both qualitative and quantitative skills, had over a decade of research experience, and didn't have a problem speaking their minds and keeping folks accountable yet shared our value system. Our first meeting convened on Tuesday, December 3, 2019, at Shari's living room table in her long-time southside home, was remnant of the legacy of the Black women who convened at kitchen tables before us (Smith, 1989). Our mission: To train and equip communities with research tools to be more civically engaged and policy informed. The rest is history in the making. The cherry on cheesecake, I had finally decided on a dissertation topic worth studying, one that honored the contributions of Black women.

Research Questions

To honor the contributions of Black women, I wanted to capture, understand, and codify their practices and perspectives as leaders in their communities and in their organizations. With these intentions in mind, I organized my research study around two main questions:

1. How do Black women leading Black-led organizations (BLOs) work toward Black liberation?
2. There are many cultural assets that Black women possess as a result of their shared experiences with anti-blackness and heteropatriarchy. These cultural assets are often freely offered to a given space and subtly embedded into structures and practices when

Black women are at the helm. What characteristics or attributes exist across Black-led organizations (BLOs) led by Black women?

For the first question, I have defined BLOs as organizations and/or spaces founded or administratively led or operated by Black people. By Black people, I mean those who self-identify as African American or Black. Recognizing that Black people have several ways of articulating their liberation, I intentionally chose not to define Black liberation for the purpose of this study. Instead, I have opted to use the shared definitions that have emerged from the interviews with BLO leadership to describe Black liberation according to how Black women leading grassroots efforts have come to understand the term. However, my personal definition and guiding reference has been stated in Chapter One. The second question seeks to identify and codify shared values and qualities across Black women who lead different organizations to determine the extent which their identity and lived experiences shapes their leadership practices, strategic thought processes, and organizational contributions. Taken together, these two questions help us understand the broader landscape of Black women's leadership and how we're collectively working, independently but together, to advance Black-led policy-relevant priorities and agendas important to our communities.

It took me quite some time to land on the most ideal methodology for this study, especially when I made a decision to focus on the work of the Black Researchers Collective that has emerged from Shari's living room table. It wasn't because I wasn't familiar with various methodological approaches; it was hard to determine one best fit to amplify what I had been seeing, hearing, feeling, and observing through my lived experiences. I am an ethnographer at heart, interested in the patterns of various cultures and subcultures (Fetterman, 2010; Wolcott, 2008) all around us. Ethnography made the most sense because it is a methodology well suited to identify the patterns of an entire culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2013), and in my case, that culture-sharing group was Black women. I was interested in the collective practices, contributions, and overall wellbeing of Black women. I was interested in capturing the

uniqueness and meaning of the values, social behaviors, ideas, beliefs, and language shared by this group as well (Fetterman, 2010; Harris, 1968; Wolcott, 2008). I debated whether this study was an ethnography with autoethnographic components or simply an autoethnography. It became inherently autoethnographic when I came to terms with the necessity of centering my personal lens and experience as the Co-Founder & Executive Director and key contributor to the development of the Collective and the execution of its core activities. The amplification of the personal is not only necessary to paint a picture on this figurative canvas that I put before you but rather magical, as it is also intended to make visible the collective power of Black women shaped by our ancestors and contoured by all of the shoulders on which we stand.

This autoethnographic design employed both qualitative and quantitative techniques to best respond to and understand these research questions. Through my personal reflections and the data collection and analysis of interviews, surveys, observations, and extant data, the study revealed that Black women are self-defining, leading, and working toward Black liberation in similar ways. The study also revealed that our cultural attributes, derived from our lived experiences as Black women, are shared and deeply influential both in our leadership practices and that ways in which we approach and address systemic issues in our communities.

Research Methodology

Ethnography is well suited to capture the perspectives and practices of Black women in leadership roles, as it involves the systematic study of people, communities, and cultures. Through its focus on the lived experiences, cultural practices, and social dynamics of a particular group of people, ethnography offers this dissertation an opportunity to unpack and hold space for the experiences and contributions of Black women in way that few other methodologies can. Ethnography involves the use of various methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis to gather rich, descriptive data about a particular culture or community (Creswell, 2013). The goal of ethnography as a methodology is

to provide an in-depth, emic perspective of a particular group, rather than simply observing or describing its behavior (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Ethnography is widely used in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, and is often seen as a way to gain a deeper understanding of cultural, social, and political phenomena (Bryman, 2012). I understand ethnography to be both a process and outcome of qualitative research (Agar, 1980), studying through observations and interviews, and interpreting/making meaning of what has been studied.

Ethnography has its roots in cultural anthropology with Franz Boas, Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Margaret Mead leading the field in ethnographic research that deviated from traditional methodologies. These scholars are important because their work represents much of the core tenets of ethnographic research. For example, Boas (1911) focused on cultural relativism, or the idea that cultural practices must be understood within the context of their own culture and cannot be judged by the standards of another culture. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) focused on structural-functionalism, which seeks to understand how social systems and institutions function to maintain social stability. Malinowski (1922) focused on participant observation as a key method in ethnographic research, and Margaret Mead (1928) is best known for her studies on the role of culture in shaping gender and sexual identity. These scholars collectively have contributed to the development and advancement of ethnography as a research method, and have helped shape our understanding of the ways in which culture, society, and individual behavior are interconnected. However, the type of ethnographic work that we're accustomed to today was adapted from anthropological fieldwork to the studying of cultural groups (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) by a number of scholars affiliated with the sociological teachings of The Chicago School such as John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Robert Park. Their contributions have led to the evolution and expansion of what we constitute and consider ethnographic work.

The Chicago School, which refers to the work of faculty and graduate students at the University of Chicago's Department of Sociology between 1915 and 1940 (Choldin, 2022), was big on studying the urban environment and the ways in which sociocultural processes are shaped by the city in the 20th century. These sociologists definitely advanced the field by challenging how these former anthropologists saw ethnography in several key ways. For example, John Dewey (1916) challenged the idea that knowledge could be acquired through objective observation alone. He argued that knowledge was not simply the product of detached observation, but rather was shaped by the interaction between the observer and the observed (Dewey, 1916). Dewey emphasized the importance of the active participation of the researcher in the research process. George Herbert Mead (1934) focused on the role of language and communication in shaping human behavior and consciousness. He argued that human beings are not simply passive receivers of cultural norms and values, but actively construct their own understanding of the world through interaction with others (Mead, 1934). He also wrote about the importance of looking at people's subjective experiences, and the ways in which they make sense of their own experiences within the larger sociocultural context. Robert Park (1952) focused on the relationship between individuals and their environments. He argued that urban life was characterized by a constant process of social change and adaptation, and that the study of urban life required a focus on both the individual and the collective experiences of urban residents (Park, 1952). Park shared the importance of considering the ways in which people's experiences are shaped by the built environment, and the ways in which these environments are constantly changing and adapting in response to human behavior. Collectively, the work of these sociologists, served as a foundation of contemporary critiques of anthropological perspectives of researchers simply parachuting in to study "the natives" and then parachuting back out because it's an extractive and otherizing approach. This dissertation is about changing those researcher/subject relationships. Although you can't ever remove the power relations

brought on by a research study, using this medium to build collective power is a hopeful step in the right direction.

In the spirit of this evolution, my love for ethnographic work developed many years ago, in part as a result of ethnography's element of relatability, and scholarly outputs that had the power to make me feel, think, and behave differently. When done well, the ability to imaginatively step inside of a culture through words on a page, understand their struggles, feel their pain, root for the underdog because you want them to win so badly, and cry for and with them when they don't, is something that I've never been able to get more saliently from any other methodology. I believe the best ethnographies make us feel so many things inside that we question whether the turn of events should've actually happened the way they did. As a young sociologist, I remember reading Sudhir Vankatesh's *Gang Leader for a Day* (2008) not long after it was first published, and I was so drawn in to how intimate of a relationship Vankatesh was able to develop with a gang leader in Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes. Setting out to understand the experiences of low-income Black people, what started as his dissertation at the University of Chicago became a profound and controversial piece of work. A self-proclaimed rogue sociologist, he was able to provide a level of nuanced understanding of gang culture in Chicago that no other researcher had ever been able to do before him. During his seven years of study, he crossed many boundaries and gathered a lot of insights that arguably ultimately did not benefit those who he studied. Despite the controversy, as a reader, I felt love, empathy, connection, anger, and sadness. Overall, I felt the humanity that I've always experienced being around gang culture growing up. I remember the day that I finished the booked. I was sitting at Argo Tea on the corner of Rush and Pearson near Loyola's downtown campus at a side table near the window and when I turned the last page, I cried. Not just any cry, I wept…for my people. The book was more than a tale or a body of research to me. It was a reminder that no one was coming to save us. It was a reminder that we, as Black people love so hard and give so much, with very little in return. What would come of the gang leader JT and his boys? What

happened to all of the families in the Robert Taylor Homes? As detailed as the book was in recounting the unsafe living conditions of Robert Taylor due to the infrastructure and lack of maintenance by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), why was this text not used as evidence to improve living conditions in other CHA housing developments across the city? The text left me lingering with more questions than answers. It made me want to *do* something about it. I became more deeply invested in research pertaining to housing, neighborhoods, and outcomes, and the history of housing in Chicago, as a result. That is the power of ethnography.

Spindler and Spindler (1987), and later reinforced by Creswell (2013), once said that the most important requirement for an ethnography is to explain behavior from the "native's point of view" and to systematically capture these perspectives and behaviors through note taking and audio and video recording. A good ethnography requires the ethnographer to both be present and engage in order for this to occur. What better way to amplify a native's point of view than a native to the culture of study herself? In *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986), critiqued traditional ethnographic methods by arguing for a more reflexive and critical approach to anthropology that engages with the political and social implications of ethnographic research. One of the methodological contributions of this study is the inversion of the presumed anthropological relationship in ethnography where the researcher goes to some allegedly 'exotic' place to study 'natives'. Instead, it is rooted within the context of the culture in which I live and work, a deep reflection of both my personal and professional investment in my people. It also explores the social, political, and historical contexts that shape knowledge production and includes a self-awareness of my own positionality and biases (Haraway, 1988), discusses the importance of interpreting cultural symbols and practices within their specific contexts and meanings, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the culture being studied (Geertz, 1973), and examines my subjective interpretation and representation of the culture being studied (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

This is where the value of autoethnography, a method that combines autobiography and ethnography and seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al, 2011; Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2011) becomes central and important, and why I have chosen to leverage autoethnography for my dissertation because no one can write a history better than those who have lived it in real time. This much can be said for non-researchers who write autobiographies that fall with the boundaries of what we might consider autoethnographic research. The insider perspective of narrative that helps us understand the cultural and sociopolitical context in which they are writing from is inherently autoethnographic. Take Sistah Souljah, who is one of my favorite authors of all time, for example. In first her book, *No Disrespect (1996)*, she starts the opening paragraph with:

> "*I never said I was angel. Nor am I innocent or holy like the Virgin Mary. What I am is natural and serious and as sensitive as an open nerve on an ice cube. I'm a young black sister with an unselfish heart who overdosed on love long ago. My closest friends consider me soft-spoken. Others say I have a deadly tongue. And while it's true that I have a spicy attitude like most of the ghetto girls I know, I back it up with a quick, precise, and knowledgeable mind. My memory runs way back and I'm inclined to remind people of the things they most like to forget."*

Whew! That paragraph alone tells us so much about who she is and the context in which she was bred. An outsider, no matter how smart or educated, could not yield an opening statement that could give the reader a better understanding than what she was able to with her own subjective reflexivity. This is perhaps one of the most powerful offerings of autoethnography. Autoethnography, the context of this study, has offered a research platform to examine my own identity and lived experiences in relation to other Black women and broader cultural, social, and political phenomena. It has provided a means for me to reflect on my own cultural and social positioning, biases, and assumptions, and examine how they contribute to my understanding of the world. It makes room for a cultural analysis and critique of the systems that constrain us

from living our best lives. The use of autoethnography in this study illuminate the ways in which culture, power, and identity shape the lives of Black women, just as other autoethnographies written by Black women (referenced toward the end of the section), have done before me.

For me, this body of work is essential, a key component of my life's work and commitment to my community. In this regard, I unapologetically approached this autoethnography critically, as a community organizer, activist, advocate, and servant leader of the work. I am not only writing and researching for the purposes of producing scholarship that advances theory and contributions more broadly, but also the work of the Black Researchers Collective. My position as a Black woman and activist researcher is essential to the methodological shaping of this work which is also why I felt it was important to name the Black Researchers Collective and tell the story of our origins, early successes, and challenges accordingly. This approach is most reflective of critical autoethnography, which builds on this idea by taking a critical stance towards the dominant power structures that shape our lives. Through a process of critical reflection and analysis, the goal of the researcher is to identify and challenge systemic injustices that are embedded in society. This approach is based on the belief that personal experiences are not separate from the social and cultural contexts in which they occur, but are rather deeply intertwined with them (Adams et al., 2015). Similar to my own, Black women's approach to critical autoethnography, according to Gillborn and Mirza (2000), is grounded in the belief that Black women are uniquely positioned to speak to issues of power, oppression, and resistance. Drawing on our own experiences and perspectives, Black women researchers provide insights and critiques that are often overlooked in mainstream research.

Autoethnography is and has always had the primary attribute of sharing our own understandings of the world, or the understandings of own people with the world (Heider, 1975; Hayano, 1979). Those of us who share a "master status" (Hughes, 1945) of belonging or permanent self-identity such as race as recognized by themselves and others (Hayano, 1979) with a group have amplified the most common type of autoethnographies through their work.

Although not as old of a methodology as some others, scholars have been writing from the lens of their master status for over 75 years, leveraging the expertise of their lived experiences and not depending on the perspectives of non-natives to tell the stories of their people (Busia, 1951; Cavan, 1972; Hostetler, 1968; Ortiz, 1969; Owusu, 1970; Roy, 1975; Srinivas, 1966; Uchendu, 1965; Yang, 1945). As beautiful as cultural narratives can be, this analysis of our cultural understandings of own lived experiences doesn't come without critique. The most prevalent being the critique of objectivity/subjectivity. This critique isn't unique to autoethnography though. Ethnography, generally speaking, and other qualitative research approaches often receive similar critiques leading to an invalidation of study design and findings as a result. Critics argue that there needs to be a sense of detachment between the ethnographer and the subjects of study in order to maintain an objective, unbias, and neutral position of a good researcher.

The feminist critique tells us that objectivity, in its most traditional form in scientific and academic inquiry, is inherently masculine and oppressive (Harding, 1991). In Sandra Harding's *Whose science? Whose knowledge?* (1991), she states, "The politics of feminist objectivity are about the politics of accountability: not only about who is accountable to whom, but about what the effects of the scientific knowledges produced are" (p. 172). Feminist objectivity teaches us that there's no such thing as an impartial or neutral perspective because all of our perspectives are shaped by our personal experiences, social and cultural contexts, and power relations. These traditional notions of objectivity only serve to reinforce patriarchal power structures and exclude the experiences and perspectives of BIPOC, women, and LGBTQ+ communities. Feminist objectivity challenges dominant ways of knowing to be more inclusive of the diversity of perspectives that we all share and the ways in which knowledge is produced and shared (Hartsock, 1983). There's a part of me that agrees that we must try our best to be fair and seemingly objective with regard to data collection and analysis techniques to yield findings that are supported by the actual evidence collected, as opposed to a projection of our own assumptions and biases.

Independent of this feminist critique, I argue that we must understand that no researcher in the field is completely detached from their own subjective experiences. Those subjective experiences shape how we engage with the communities that we study and certainly dictate how we analyze the data we receive, from the thematic developments via coding to the codification of experiences in our analysis that we're processing that are not like our own. There are no blank slates in fieldwork; just flawed humans with learned behaviors applying what they have learned in the ways they best know how. If we can agree to this, surely we can understand that when a researcher with no membership ties to a cultural group enters a community setting the one thing that they do not suspend is their white racial frame (Feagin, 2011) because this is also the frame from which our academic teachings on what it means to be a good researcher derive. The white racial frame functions as our dominant view of the world. It governs our institutions, pedagogy, values, and practices. In the context of the United States, the fertile ground on which my work has been sewn, it is also fraught with the systemic framework of anti-blackness and white racism. In consideration of this, the conscious use of reflexive practices, is necessary. In "Autoethnography and narratives of self", Andrew Sparkes (2015) wrote "Reflexive practices involve an ongoing process of critical self-reflection and self-questioning, which is embedded in the research process and produces knowledge that is more self-aware, ethical, and inclusive" (p. 88). Understanding this, it was crucial for me to lean into my own subjectivity as a Black woman to reflect on how to best examine and evaluate the practices of Black women that centers an experience of a collective care in acknowledgement and recognition of a lack thereof. One of the reflexive practices that I employed throughout this process was mindfulness practices (aka meditation) to remain self-aware, thoughtful, and focused. I find mindful exercises to be super helpful, as they strengthen my ability to observe and accept my own experiences without judgment or too much attachment, gaining better clarity and insight into my own perspectives and biases without bearing shame for not getting things perfect or right the first time around. Journaling was another big reflexive practice for me. It's

such a useful way for me to engage in regular self-reflection. Writing is my first love and a cathartic form of therapy for me, as it allows me to identify patterns and themes to gain a deeper understanding of myself and the context in which I am contributing. Finally, I did a fair amount of external processing and debriefing with my team. Bringing a team together to discuss their experiences, identify strengths and weaknesses, and evaluate our own contributions was not only helpful in identifying our own biases, assumptions, and limitations, but also in working together to improve our collective performance.

Another major critique of autoethnography is the over-reliance of one qualitative technique (i.e., participant observations) over others (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Glesne, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Spradley, 1980). This study employs a multipronged approach with a number of qualitative techniques employed, each with the deliberate intention of providing deeper insights on the topic area of investigation. In the context of this study, all of the data sources taken together help provide a deeper understanding of the topic of investigation through the use of a variety of techniques to triangulate the data and strengthen the narratives of lived experiences worthy of being told. Autoethnography, in the most beautiful utility of its form, transcends self-narration to amplify cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008). Heewon Chang (2008) describes autoethnography as descriptive, analytical, and confessional. The power of autoethographies should not be understated, especially with regard to its inherent ability to provide Black women with a methodological platform that allows us to leverage our own subjectivity in a process of rigorous analysis of our cultural phenomena. Robin Boylorn (2016) uses what she calls black girl autoethnography to talk about embodied, critical, and culturally situated research that begins (and/or) ends at home, in the bodies we live with, and the social circumstances we live through. In Writing Ourselves into Existence, Davis et al. (2021) uses a collaborative autoethnography to co-narrate their experiences pertaining to academia being a hostile environment for Black women while conducting a study for, by, and about Black women. Attempting to prepare her own daughter for the anti-black and

heteropatriarchic experiences of the world, Renata Ferdinand (2021) uses autoethnography to demonstrate the multigenerational lived experiences of motherhood when mothering is shaped by race, class, and gender. Rachel Griffin (2012) combines Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2009) and autoethnography to advocate for Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) as a theoretical and methodological means for Black female academics to critically narrate the pride and pain of Black womanhood. This is merely a short list of autoethnographic publications by unsung Black women from the last decade but the list goes on. There are so many more stories, written from a critical and cultural perspective and the thread that binds them all is a Black feminist lens; most of which include the collective experiences of other Black women in their analysis.

In this sense, autoethnography is a Black feminist methodology (Brown-Vincent, 2019) because it doesn't force us to abandon ourselves to inauthentically make meaning from a place of objectivity. It is a space for us to leverage our whole selves and lived experiences to strengthen our academic and intellectual arguments. Too often, non-Black scholars are praised for their cultural analysis of Black communities but when we, as Black people living, breathing, and experiencing our communities as insiders, share our reflections and analyses they are either not taken seriously, not objective enough, or downright dismissed as being essentialistic (McClaurin, 2001). Upon embarking on this dissertation topic, I received similar critiques by a former member of my dissertation committee; essentializing critiques that I felt would have not even been broached if I were not a Black woman exploring the practices of other Black women through a Black feminist lens. Nevertheless, Stacy Holman Jones (2013), in her *Handbook of Autoethnography* offers us critical definition of autoethnography as a methodology that:

> *"…requires living consciously, emotionally, reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over*

if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that we rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and how we want to be. And in the process, it seeks a story that is hopeful, where authors ultimately write themselves as survivors of the story they are living."

I can't think of any other methodology that requires these things of us in order to take up the practice of research well. How good of a scholar can we really call ourselves if we're only executing and publishing research from a process of rote learned behaviors? How much are we really contributing to the generation of new knowledge and theories if we are fixated on the past as a means to fill gaps in literature but not as a means to deeply reflect on how we retrieve what was lost or missing all along? Perhaps this level of reflexivity should exist in all other methodologies as well. If this should be the case, perhaps there is no real need for the rationale of its use in this study as it is simply a necessary component of doing research well.

Research Design

I leveraged various qualitative and quantitative techniques for in this autoethnography. Although autoethnographies are inherently qualitative, I felt that quantitative techniques might best complement the narratives that emerged from the findings. Selfishly, this study is partially designed for continuous improvement. Although it is contributing to a newer body of work often underacknowledged by the academy, it is not designed exclusively for intellectual thought. It is meant to be practical and useful, with the potential for an application of recommendations generated from key findings to support the grassroots work happening on the ground across Chicago. This study is meant to be descriptive, making room for me, both as the researcher and Executive Director, to comprehensively understand how the activities and programmatic offerings of the Black Researchers Collective in Chicago have been experienced, interpreted, and adapted by the local community. In addition, how it functions in juxtaposition to other organizations so that we may learn best strategies from the practices of our grassroots

comrades as well. Autoethnography offers a window into those cultural experiences to provide a nuanced understanding advantageous to our collective and community growth.

Perhaps this work is happening in other parts of the country, but it is a quintessential Chicago story. It is a Chicago story relatable to the broader world by way of an in-depth understanding and articulation of grassroots liberation work happening in Chicago in relationship to Black women and BLOs such as the Black Researchers Collective. The unique history of Chicago neighborhoods, the legacy of the shoulders on which Chicago organizers stand, the community organizing frameworks and approaches to building collective power are all key components of BRC programming and specific to the story of Chicago.

Black Researchers Collective has four different pillars to our work: (1) community education via Coffee Chats and Research-Based Community Workshop Intensives (CWIs); (2) research, evaluation, and technical assistance; (3) grassroots policy strategies for community engagement and advocacy; and (4) development of a centralized pipeline of Black researchers. The context of this dissertation focuses on pillar one, as the bulk of our organizational priorities and community impact over the last three years has been situated in this area. The data sources collected and used for analysis were obtained over a period of a one and half years, between July 2021 and December 2022. See Table 1 below for the complete list of data sources, their sample sizes, length or number of sources, and key foçi for this study.

Table 1. Data Source Crosswalk

Data Sources	Sample Size (*N*)	Length / Number	Foçi
Workshop Applicant Data	155	N/A	Applicant Attributes Bronzeville (n=41) South Chicago (n=21) South Shore (n=24) Washington Park (n=24) Woodlawn (n=45)

Participant Workshop Surveys	43	129*	Cohort Attributes + Key Impact Vars Bronzeville (n=11) South Chicago (n=6) South Shore (n=11) Washington Park (n=5) Woodlawn (n=11)
Participant Workshop Journals	50	200**	Five reflection prompts per cohort workshop participant
Post-Program Participant Interviews	7	Up to 30 mins	Bronzeville Cohort Only CWI impact via project development and skill application
Observations: Org Board Mtgs	10	Up to 120 mins	Discussion themes and how decisions are made
Collective Interviews	8	Up to 90 mins	All constructs
BLO Leader Interviews	16	Up to 90 mins	All constructs

* Three workshop surveys per participant
**This number is 200 and not 250 because it accounts for missing journal reflections from multiple participants across communities served

This study includes a total of 31 semi-structured interviews with program participants of the Black Researchers Collective and Black women leaders within and external to the Collective, 10 observation recordings of Board meetings, 155 workshop applications, 129 participant surveys examining the impact of the Community Workshop Intensive, and 200 participant journals amplifying the experiences of participants attending our Community Workshop Intensives. Of the 31 interviews, eight included 90-minute interviews with the board and staff of the Black Researchers Collective, including myself. Although shorter in length, up to 30 minutes, seven of the interviews were with program participants from the Bronzeville cohort of our Community Workshop Intensive[10]. The largest sample of interview participants included 90-minute interviews with 16 other Black women Founders and Executive Directors from Black-

[10] The purpose of the Community Workshop Intensive initiative was to train communities with research tools that they can use. We sought a small community cohort of folks who desired to be more deeply invested in the long-term improvement of their community but may have been unsure as to where or how to start. During the Community Workshop Intensive, participants learned how to identify and take a policy-relevant issue from ideation to a plan of action by using research tools as a capacity-building strategy for parents, organizers, grassroots leaders, and advocates. This workshop intensive was intended for people who lived and/or worked in the community of activation. Attendees received a $240 stipend if they attended all three workshops in person.

led organizations (BLOs) primarily on the south and west sides of Chicago. These interviews explored how Black women saw themselves, their leadership, their values, and contributions in the work of the organizations that they led and beyond. The extent to which our shared experiences bind us and cultural approaches ground us have implications for our future work as we leverage these learnings to strengthen our practice.

In addition to the interviews, I collected and analyzed virtual observations of one year of Collective meetings during the pandemic from July 2021 to June 2022. Through these observations, I examined the decision-making practices of Black women collectively leading the organization. When we founded the Collective in 2019, we originally planned to record all of our Board meetings to examine and share with others the messy process of how Black women take a shared vision from ideation to implementation so others would know that they're not alone in their process. However, it wasn't until the summer of 2021 when we actually started recording as a result of my desire to capture the nuances of our own decision-making practices. Given that we were a pandemic baby that took root during the height of COVID-19, all recorded observations took place via Zoom.

The final strands of data leveraged in this study were program data from one of Black Researchers Collective's core educational activities, Community Workshop Intensives, to understand the potential community impact and relevance of the work of the Collective. The purpose of the Community Workshop Intensive is to train communities with research tools that they can use. A more thorough description of the Community Workshop Intensive is outlined in Chapter Four. A sample of our Syllabus and 90-Day Checklist can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively. The data collected from Black Researchers Collective's Community Workshop Intensives was used in this study include an analysis of participant (1) interviews, (2) surveys, and (3) journal reflections from our community education program in the south side communities of Bronzeville, South Shore, Woodlawn, Washington Park, and South Chicago. Each of these data sources are thoroughly unpacked with a life of their own in Chapter Four.

Population and Sample Selection

The workshop applicant data, participant surveys, post-workshop interviews, and participant journals were all organization-level data obtained for the purposes of the Black Researchers Collective but were leveraged in the context of this study to best understanding how my experience, and other Black women like me, gets translated into practice, and how the communities that we serve have been impacted by our programming. I obtained applicant data from community intake forms that prospective applicants complete to be considered as part of the cohort where the research-based Community Workshop Intensives take place. Concerning applicant data, I was primarily interested in the age and education level of prospective candidates who applied to our program, and how they rated their level of community engagement, knowledge of and/or experience with research, and their level of knowledge of and/or experience with policy. I administered participant surveys after each workshop session at three different time points with similar levels of dosage therein: one after the first five hours, one after the first 10 hours, and one after the full 12 hours. For this data source, I was interested in the demographic characteristics of program participants and, coupled with the applicant data, the extent to which their knowledge, skills, and behaviors changed as a result of their participation in BRC programming. I typically conducted post-programmatic interviews within 90-days of the Community Workshop Intensive. We, at the BRC, re-engaged participants to learn about the progress of their research-based community projects generated through a plan of action in the workshops, and how they activated the research tools and skills that they learned in their everyday lives beyond Collective programming. This study reports on each of these components in Chapter Four as well.

I also asked participants to journal during each workshop and I collected them throughout the course of each intensive. To facilitate participant journaling, I provided them with a series of prompts to guide their writing and reflection. Those were leveraged in the context of this study to learn from participants' overall experience.

For this study, I used a combination of nonprobability sampling techniques for data collection. The first was a purposive sampling to determine criteria to select interview participants that can inform an understanding of my research problem and central phenomenon of study (Creswell, 2013). I leveraged my lived experiences as a grassroots community organizer to identify and target a number of Black-led organizations on the south and west sides of Chicago working to improve communities in a variety of ways. Within this sampling method, I used a strategy of maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2013; Etikan et al., 2016) by which I was able to determine a set of criteria on the front end that might differentiate participants and select based on that differentiation to maximize the likelihood of producing findings that might reflect different experiences and perspectives. The second and third sampling methods included convenient and snowball sampling approaches articulated in Chapter Five.

Sources of Data (and their Instruments)

Over the course of the dissertation, I used a variety of qualitative data sources, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and extant data, each with their own protocol or instruments. Although some of the data sources were the property of the Black Researchers Collective, as Co-Founder & Executive Director, I was directly responsible for the development of all survey and interview protocols and data collection activities, including organization documents and data generated as early as December 2019 (i.e., meeting notes) when the Collective initially convened. I developed protocols specific to the category of interviewees and revised them after the initial round of interviews to comprehensively capture additional information not originally considered to examine the radical Black foundations of their work and understand their contributions to community on a local level. Each interview lasted up to 90 minutes and was scheduled at times convenient for participants (i.e., before or after work hours). Participants were recruited by extending an invitation to participate via email. All of the

interviews were audio recorded, with participant consent, and transcribed to facilitate data analysis.

Data Collection and Management

I have spent many years managing projects of various scopes, the strategies of which gained were applied to this dissertation. Key components of this process were project review, quality assurance, budget monitoring, ethics review, and adherence to research standards and principles. As part of my internal project review procedures, I conferred with my advisor and committee chair frequently to discuss progress, the status of upcoming deliverables, needs and supports, and any problems that arose with respect to performance (i.e., quality of work; the meeting of goals and expectations), timeline, fieldwork, or community partnerships. These meetings worked to ensure that my dissertation study ran smoothly and that I had all of the appropriate resources needed to execute according to plan.

In addition to conferring with my advisor regularly, I identified at least one quality assurance (QA) reviewer who was independent of my dissertation committee to regularly monitor and ensure the quality of the project, especially given the short- and long-term implications that this work has for local communities. My QA reviewer was a colleague at the Black Researchers Collective and had a minimum of 10 years of professional research experience as well as a level of expertise in one or more areas (i.e., education, policy, etc.). Furthermore, all documents concerning design, plans, or findings (including both draft and final documents) were reviewed by this reviewer.

Throughout the study, I ensured that risks to subjects were minimized, selection of subjects were equitable, informed consent was sought and documented, and the privacy of subjects was protected. Prior to starting new data collection activities, I ensured that my proposed activities were reviewed and approved by UIC’s Institutional Review Board (IRB),

which assessed the study's compliance with the standards of conduct and protection of the rights of human research subjects.

Although this study is not specifically an evaluation, I have spent part of my career as an evaluator adhering to rigorous standards and principles that I think were helpful to recall and reference in this dissertation. As a result, to ensure that my work was both of high quality and held to high ethical standards, it drew on two important sources for guidance: The Program Evaluation Standards developed by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011) and the American Evaluation Association (AEA) Guiding Principles for Evaluators (2004). These standards influence the work itself, the methodologies employed, and how findings are disseminated; I incorporated this guidance into this body of work. The assigned QA reviewer also served the purpose of member checking to ensure (1) accuracy and resonance (Birt et al., 2016) and (2) that my practice remained reflexive and reflective of our shared and collective commitment to the work.

Data Analysis Procedures

My coding process involved a systematic procedure of identifying and analyzing themes and patterns in my textual data. I developed a coding structure with *a priori* or parent codes based on the questions in my interview protocol to serve as a coding tree for key priority topic areas related to my research questions. All other codes therein, particularly the child codes, were emergent to illuminate key themes; creating a structured opportunity for an organic analysis rooted in the data and not my assumptions about what might emerge from the data.

I developed and followed a step-by-step procedure to successfully code data along predetermined themes while allowing room for exploration and discovery. In general, I have analyzed interview data using sequential processes, as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). All interviews were recorded with participant permission and transcribed. First, I reviewed transcripts of the interviews for clarity and identified themes that might be included in the coding

structure. Second, I coded transcripts using NVivo, a qualitative research software. As themes were emergent, the codes were refined to better reflect the evidence provided for the data analysis. Third, I created summaries and data displays to examine key trends and differences.

Where appropriate, I developed and analyzed constructs using the Rasch rating scale model (Andrich, 1978; Wright & Masters, 1982). The technique uses information from each of the linked items to create one overall score for the construct in question. For survey items not amenable to this scale construction, I examined response frequencies. In either case, I conducted a quantitative descriptive analysis with three main approaches: (1) aggregating findings to examine variations in workshop implementation; (2) examining change over time to understand the extent of progress being made; and (3) identifying areas of relative strength and challenge.

Finally, this study leveraged pseudonyms for study participants to personalize their work and give them a unique identity that is easy to remember and relate to. Pseudonyms were used, as opposed to real names, to maintain analytic power, which was crucial to analyzing data accurately and drawing valid conclusions. In addition, using pseudonyms extended greater protection of the privacy and confidentiality of participants. This prevented researcher's bias from influencing my analysis by ensuring that I focus solely on the data and not the people behind it, beyond their characteristics and attributes germane to the study. This helped maintain some semblance of objectivity and a level of accuracy in the analysis process.

Validity and Reliability

Overall, as far as validity is concerned, the study accurately assesses the cultural phenomena as it was intended to do and all variables were measured as desired. Regarding external validity, it’s hard to say the extent to which the findings are transferable to a broader population. However, I do believe that the findings have implications for a broader population which is why I have chosen to situate this work in the context of education policy. Regarding

internal validity, this study was conducted through a rigorous and strategic process that could be adapted and replicated in any other setting. Validity in autoethnography is often discussed in terms of credibility (believability), transferability (applicable to other contexts or situations), dependability (stability and consistency of the process), and confirmability (shaped by the researcher's biases and values (Ellis et al., 2011). Norman Denzin (2010) argued that "Validity in autoethnography is not simply a matter of accuracy, representativeness, or generalizability. It is, rather, a matter of artful storytelling that presents a compelling, evocative, and convincing portrayal of the lifeworld under investigation," and that is precisely what this dissertation endeavors to be. In this autoethnographic study, as other scholars have argued, validity is rooted in reflexivity (Bochner, 2002; Ellis, 2004) and is a continuous process that involves balancing the subjective and objective, as well as personal and cultural perspectives, and my own identity, along with the views of others in the cultural context being examined.

Given my interest in addressing what I perceive to be policy-relevant questions, I chose to leverage a number of data sources to strengthen this study. I'm in complete and utter agreement with renowned sociologist and ethnographer Norman Denzin (2009) that one theory, method, or observer cannot fully capture all relevance there is to be captured in a study, and my dissertation is a prime example of this despite it being an autoethnography. One of the major benefits of the approach that I used is triangulation through the use of multiple data sources (Fusch et al., 2018). With its earliest origins in geometry (Campbell & Fiskel, 1959), Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, and Sechrest (1966) reintroduced triangulation, through the use of multiple sources of data, with the intention of enhancing the validity and reliability of the research being investigated. Triangulation is two or more data sources, methods, theories, or investigators in the study of a single phenomenon (Denzin, 1970). For Denzin, triangulation was originally tailored toward qualitative research and researchers but was eventually extended to be inclusive of multimethod approaches. Denzin (1970; 1978) developed four types of triangulation, specifically in service of increasing objectivity, truth, and validity (dependability and credibility).

In the context of this dissertation study, triangulation was essential because it served to support the enhancement of the reliability of my findings (Stavros & Westberg, 2009), data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015), helped mitigate potential bias (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009; Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Gorissen, van Bruggen, & Jochems, 2013; Horne & Horgan, 2012; Lloyd, 2011), and promoted social change. Granted, the shadow side of triangulation is that it can produce inconsistent or contradictory findings (Heale & Forbes, 2013: O'Reilly & Parker, 2013) that should be considered and/or reconciled. However, despite these limitations, the validity of my findings were enhanced through this process which has increased the likelihood of my research contributing to the field in meaningful and substantive ways.

There is much more to be explored with this work. Perhaps, four to five years down the road, someone might have a desire to replicate this study. However, replicating qualitative studies are challenging, as qualitative research often involves complex and context-specific processes. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), replication in qualitative research involves more than simply duplicating the original study. Instead, it requires a careful consideration of the unique contextual factors that may impact the study's findings. Nevertheless, it is possible if the nuances of the original study's design are considered (i.e., the sampling strategy, data collection methods, and analysis techniques) and there's a thorough understanding of the theoretical framework and research questions. I believe that the current study, as is, is methodological sound enough to validate or extend its findings through replication. After all, replication helps us ensure the reliability and validity of our research findings.

Ethical Considerations

Widely known, there are a number of reasonably anticipated risks or discomforts that may result from participation in a research study. Fortunately, this research study involved minimal risk. Upon receiving approval from the University of Illinois at Chicago's Institutional Review Board, informed consent forms were distributed to interview participants. To the best of

my knowledge, participants experienced no risk of harm beyond what they would've experienced in everyday life. To minimize this risk, participants were given an option to keep their interview confidential, including from other potential or actual research participant, by using pseudonyms and changing any identifiable information. Other ways that I attempted to minimize harm or risk was inviting participants to skip and/or not respond to any questions that may make them uncomfortable.

To incentivize participation, people were offered a $50 digital gift card; an offer that rapidly increased to $100 as a token of gratitude and appreciation. Precautions were taken to protect participants privacy during the initial identification, recruitment, and data collection phases. Data security procedures for all virtual interviews included a secure meeting ID and password protected login for each interview. With the participant's permission, I audio and/or video recorded each interview. All data sources are currently securely monitored on a password protected laptop, an encrypted drive with a code linked to the identity of each subject. Only the researchers listed in the consent form have access to these files, and they will not be share with anyone. The study data is also the official program data of the Black Researchers Collective which, to some extent, will be reliant on the findings, protocols, and procedures of this study to tell its story in its most remarkable form.

Summary

In "Re-thinking intersectionality," Jennifer Nash (2008) reflects on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in feminist thought and practice. She argued that acknowledging and exploring our own positionality is critical to producing research and writing that is more inclusive, reflexive, and attentive to our diverse experiences. In this study, I leveraged autoethnography as a method to explore both my leadership and the leadership experiences of other Black women from diverse backgrounds who care deeply about the life chances and freedom of Black communities. Throughout the entire course of this process, I spent a lot of time reflecting,

questioning, and in careful and thoughtful deliberation with myself about the methodological decisions that I was making. Similarly, I spent a great deal of time externally processing my thoughts, preliminary learnings, and potential post-doctoral action items with others, particularly with those who much of this work is intended for, to arrive at the right process that might yield some potential benefit for the communities that we serve. The time spent in the field was not an exercise in fieldwork. It was time spent building, learning, teaching, growing, and sharing vulnerably. It was time spent giving, just as others have given to me. This body of work recognizes that there is a need for more research that is inclusive, reflexive, and attentive to our identity, needs, and the power dynamics of the harmful systems that shape our lives; and is positioned in response to some of those needs that scholars have been writing about for many years (Leon, 2018; Pratt-Clarke, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Foster, 2019). Its cultural analysis of the phenomena of study is critical, self-evaluative, and as authentic as it can be.

Chapter Four
Our Story: History in the Making

“I am my ancestors wildest dreams.” — Brandan “BMike” Odums

Introduction

I feel honored to be serving in my role as Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Black Researchers Collective. What a time it has been! I don't know if I fully imagined what it is that I am currently experiencing in my role, but I do know that I, along with the other Black women in the Collective, had a vision for how we could collectively use all of the skills that we have, both as Black women and professionals who appreciate what research can offer, to strengthen and sustain our communities. That vision has manifested beyond my wildest imagination. The fascinating thing about it is that we're still new. Our organization just had our three-year anniversary in December. Sometimes I reflect on what we're doing and although I don't know where this journey might take us, I know we're onto something big. I feel it. I've hustled, grinded, and patiently waited my entire career to do just the thing that I'm doing right now: using all of my scholarly and technical skills to help us get free, on our terms, without having to consult with those external our communities to do so. I can put the vulnerabilities of my Black womaness on display without reservation and express care all I want without it being exploited or abused, truly believing as Saidiya Hartman does, that “care is the antidote to violence” (Hartman, 2017).

I initially became a researcher because I wanted to impact policy and legislation. I saw and experienced deep injustices and inequities and wanted to positively contribute to the life chances and outcomes of Black people, my people. I wanted to use research as a tool to be able to do that. I used to think that I had to work for some big company or academic institution to accomplish my goals, and I spent a lot of time doing just that, trying to figure out where the sweet spot was. I think I found it. In many ways, I, and the women who have aligned their solidarity with me, are all trailblazers of a new era. I’m not quite sure if we’re at the front or

somewhere in the middle but I know I'm here to do something great. I'm here to leave a mark. I'm here to leave things better than what I found them, like all those who came before me. That's kind of how I see it. I question who I'm looking to for guidance before I jump to conclusions, inspired by Mama Zora who had the nerve to walk her own way in her search for reality, rather than climb upon the rattling wagon of wishful illusions (Hurston, 1943). I'm intentional about how I sharpen the iron that strengthens my mind's needs because Auntie Toni said we can do some rather extraordinary things if that's what we really believe (Rothstein, 1987). When I look into the mirror, I have a deeper appreciation of my race because Cousin Audre reminded me that Black feminism isn't white feminism in blackface (Lorde, 2007). So I sink lower, into the comfort of my own skin, with my journey filled with love in motion, as bell hooks taught me that love is a practice, a participatory emotion (hooks, 2018). I take my charge very seriously, both as a Black woman and leader. Knowing that there are a lot of people who are counting on me, yearning for what we do at the Black Researchers Collective. It may seem small now, but the early gains that we've been able to see lets me know that we're on to something beautiful.

This is why I felt was necessary to approach this dissertation autoethnographically. So much of who I am, my vision for community, where I've been, and how I arrived here is reflected in the values, spirit, principles, and work of the BRC. As much can be said for the other Black women in the collective as well. Collectively, who we are has become the heartbeat of the Black Researchers Collective. Our leadership, passions, perspectives, lived experiences, and culture passed down from generations through our ancestors, have infused life into the structure of our organization. It is a reflection of us and we are a reflection of it, in the flesh. The story of our work at this juncture can best be told through a reflection of ourselves. This, and the additional chapters that follow, attempt to tell a story about how Black women leading Black-led organizations (BLOs) work toward Black liberation and amplify the characteristics or attributes that exist across Black-led organizations (BLOs) led by Black women. This chapter primarily focuses on the exploration of these two primary areas of interests through a bird's eye view of

the Black Researchers Collective's external reach and community impact. Through an autoethnographic lens, this chapter provides a unique perspective that helps to contextualize and bring to life the work of Black women leading BLOs in the struggle for Black liberation. By examining the Black Researchers Collective's external reach and community impact, we gain valuable insight into the Collective's role in advancing the broader goals of the Black community. In doing so, we hope to contribute to ongoing conversations in the field and communities around the experiences, challenges, and successes of Black-led organizations led by Black women. Overall, this chapter serves as a crucial foundation for the subsequent chapters, which further explore the BRC's work and its intersection with the broader Black-led organizational landscape. For example, Chapter Five seeks to deepen that exploration through the lens of Black women internal and external to the Black Researchers Collective. Chapter 6, in the form of a policy brief, demonstrates the relevance of these attributes and contributions with regard to their significance in transforming education policy.

The Weaving: Sampling, Data Analyses, and Key Findings

Focusing on one component of the first pillar of our work, community education via research-based Community Workshop Intensives, this chapter exclusively focuses on the first four data sources in the table: (1) workshop applicant data, (2) participant workshop surveys, (3) participant workshop journals, and (4) post-program participant interviews. The passages included in this chapter come directly from the narratives of what we affectionately call our civic researchers, those who have engaged with and completed our workshop programming. The data sources for used in this chapter were collected from October 2021 through December 2022.

Table 2. Program Data Source Crosswalk

Data Sources	Sample Size (*N*)	Length / Number	Foçi

Workshop Applicant Data	155	N/A	Applicant Attributes Bronzeville (n=41) South Chicago (n=21) South Shore (n=24) Washington Park (n=24) Woodlawn (n=45)
Participant Workshop Surveys	43	129*	Cohort Attributes + Key Impact Vars Bronzeville (n=11) South Chicago (n=6) South Shore (n=11) Washington Park (n=5) Woodlawn (n=11)
Participant Workshop Journals	50	200	Five reflection prompts per cohort workshop participant
Post-Program Participant Interviews	7	Up to 30 mins	Bronzeville Cohort Only CWI impact via project development and skill application

* Three workshop surveys per participant

Community Workshop Intensives

I'm as much a part of the community as the people that we serve. What I mean by that is I'm constantly learning and growing, challenging my perspectives and innovating. We are consistently doing new things, tweaking and tailoring to the needs of our communities. When I thought about this dissertation and the exploration of understanding how Black women are leading through Black-led organizations, it made the most sense to approach it through, first, the lens of how key organizational decisions get made, particularly among myself and the Board of Directors. Secondly, I wanted to examine it from the lens of community members who are engaging in one of our core programs, the Community Workshop Intensive (CWI), a curriculum model developed from my professional experiences as a researcher and lived experiences as a Black woman, and fashioned by the feedback of the Collective. Although this particular model is the first of its kind that I am aware of, the community engagement strategies on which we stand are in perfect alignment with the legacy of Black women, those who have transitioned and are still on this side of the Jordan, who have been organizing and mobilizing Black communities for years. For example, Fannie Lou Hamer was a civil rights activist who worked to increase voter

registration and political representation for Black folks in the 1960, including founding the Freedom Farm Cooperative which helped Black farmers in Mississippi buy land for their families (Bracey, 2014). Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors founded the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013, in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin, to address systemic racism and police brutality against Black people (Cullors, 2018). Tarana Burke created the #MeToo movement in 2006 to raise awareness about sexual assault and harassment, particularly through the experiences of Black women (Burke, 2021). Consistently infusing a feminist consciousness into the Black Panther Party, Ericka Huggins was a leader in the 1960s and 70s that worked on programs that provided free breakfast for children, free health clinics, and education programs for Black folk (Phillips, 2014). Mary Hooks is a co-founder of Southerners on New Ground (SONG), a grassroots organization that focuses on LGBTQ+ rights, immigrant rights, and the fight against mass incarceration in the south (Carthage College, 2021). The legacy of Black women palpable. In this regard, our model is reflection of theirs, designed to serve our people in meaningful ways.

The purpose of the Community Workshop Intensive was to train communities with research tools that they can use. We sought a small community cohort of folks who desired to be more deeply invested in the long-term improvement of their community but may be unsure where or how to start. During the Community Workshop Intensive, over a period of 12 hours in three days, participants learned how to identify and take a policy-relevant issue from ideation to a plan of action, using research tools as a capacity-building strategy for parents, organizers, grassroots leaders, and advocates. Additional details regarding what and how things happened in the CWI are weaved into the sample discussion and fleshed out throughout the rest of this chapter. However, studying the Community Workshop Intensives and their impact in communities provided valuable insights into the strategies and tools used by Black women serving Black organizations to create positive change in their communities. Examining the research tools and capacity-building strategies leveraged during the workshop, in consideration

of the work being led by Black women in other organizations across the city, helped me identify successful practices along the journey toward Black liberation. Studying the Community Workshop Intensive offered an illustration of how research tools and community engagement strategies developed and executed by Black women can be employed to empower, advance, and achieve progress. We designed the workshop intensive for people who live and/or work in the community of activation. Attendees received up to a $300 stipend for participating for attending all three workshops in person. Black-owned restaurants in the communities of activation provided food during each session to support to overall economic wellness of the neighborhoods we serve. The BRC collected CWI data as one component of the many data sources that informed the Collective's continuous improvement, specifically with regard to the content and delivery of our community education models. A key data source used but not included in this dissertation is our Community Coffee Chats.

We knew that research has a history of colonization and exploitation and therefore has caused deeply rooted harms in the Black community. We also anticipated the majority of participants to be Black women, as we are taught that, no matter what we have going on, we must use our strength to take care of business (Burnett-Zeigler, 2021). That business almost always includes the collective care of others, especially our family and community, which meant the Collective understood it was only ethical to monetarily incentivize that process. Whether participants used the incentive for childcare, groceries, or something else, the Collective saw the incentive as a way to encourage people to take an interest in the work and enable them to be present with their whole selves in the workshop intensive. I always tell people, you will come for the coins, but you are going to leave excited about what's possible with research and data; learning a few things that you didn't know or may have known, but may be in reinvigorated to think about things very differently than before. Since the fall of 2021, we have conducted Community Workshop Intensives in five Chicago southside communities: Bronzeville, South Chicago, South Shore, Washington Park, and Woodlawn.

To date, a total of 155 people have applied for our program, as referenced through our workshop applicant data. Although community members do have to apply for our program, the barrier to entry is extremely low. The only eligibility requirements were that (1) applicants needed to live and/or work in the community in which the workshops took place, as these workshops are intended to have a hyper-local effect, and (2) participants needed to be able to attend all three workshops in person since they were designed to yield a cohort or family unit, one in which they can learn together, build together, and have some level of commitment to one another based on the visions they share for their communities. Once applicants were screened, I did a stratified sampling process which included three factors: age, education, and applicant knowledge of and/or experience with research. I sampled on those three factors because the Collective really wanted a mixed bag of participants with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Although we're targeting Black folks, we recognize that we are not a monolith. There is so much diversity in our collective experiences, even when those experiences are shared so we wanted to bring as much of that energy to the Community Workshop Intensive as possible. It was necessary to stratify based on race or gender because we were deliberately targeting Black communities and knew, based on our lived experiences, that Black women would overwhelmingly represent the sample. See Table 3 for the workshop applicant data findings.

Table 3. Workshop Applicant Data Findings Across Five Communities

Variable	Values	Total (*N*=155)	Frequency (%)
Race	Black or African American	134	86%
	Biracial/Multiracial*	10	6%
	Hispanic or Latino/a/x	5	3%
	American Indian or Alaskan Native	2	1%
	Asian	1	1%
	White	0	0%
	Missing	3	2%

Gender	Woman Man Nonbinary and/or Nonconforming Prefer not to reply	121 31 1 2	78% 20% 1% 1%
Education	College degree** No college degree Missing	97 58 2	60% 38% 2%
Live or Work in the Community	Yes No	139 16	90% 10%
Age	18 – 35 36 – 55 55+	48 59 48	32% 38% 30%
Level of Community Engagement	1 2 3 4 5	4 18 61 37 35	3% 12% 39% 24% 23%
Level of Knowledge and/or Experience with Research	1 2 3 4 5	6 10 58 50 31	4% 6% 37% 32% 20%
Level of Knowledge and/or Experience with Policy	1 2 3 4 5	10 23 63 37 22	6% 15% 41% 24% 14%

*This identity value includes those who also identify as Black
**This value includes Associates and Professional Degrees

People came into the workshop intensives with a certain amount of education, particularly in terms of college degrees. Some folks in our courses even come with advanced degrees, but we wanted to make sure that everyone who chose to participate felt like they were an important part of the process. Moreover, we wanted them to own the space that we would build together, equally contributing as well as learning. Our community agreements included a workshop value that ‘elitism has no place here’ which created an opportunity for people to learn from one another as an integral part of the experience. In addition to education, age was an

important factor. We know that folks who are a little older and may be closer to retirement may have a little more time to be active in their communities, but we still wanted a mixed bag in terms of cross-generational stakeholders who can strengthen community practice. We wanted to activate Gen Zs, Millennials, and Baby Boomers, and maybe even a few from the Silent generation who might still be around to really strengthen the learnings with the context of our lived experiences and communal institutional knowledge. Some people have been in their Chicago community for many, many years as a result of that trek that our parents, grandparents, and for some of us, great grandparents, made during the Great Migration of the 20th century to the north from the south. We wanted to honor the legacy of those contributions yielded from our history accordingly.

Finally, by sampling on applicants' level of knowledge and/or experience with research, we were able to curate a primary and alternate sample of people who both had much to offer but also room to grow. Community Workshop Intensive applicants have the following attributes: 92 percent self-identified as Black, 78 percent were women (but nearly a quarter of the sample were men), 60 percent with degrees (including Associates and Professional), and were nearly an even distribution across age groupings (around a third in each group) with those between the age of 36 and 55 being highest represented. We asked applicants how they would rate their current level of community engagement on a scale from *not at all engaged* to *extremely engaged*, and most applicants (86 percent) were at least somewhat engaged in their community. We asked how they would rate their current level of knowledge and/or experience with research, and most applicants (89 percent) had at least some knowledge of and/or experience with research. Finally, we asked how they would rate their current level of knowledge of and/or experience with policy, and about 79 percent had at least some knowledge of and/or experience with policy. Overall, we had a group of applicants who perceived themselves to be fairly knowledgeable but were looking for more to strengthen their practice. In addition, 90 percent of the applicants lived and/or worked in the community where the

workshops were hosted which is a really great finding to see because it is an indication that our community organizing and outreach strategies that we employ in terms of connecting with community-based organizations, elected officials, local businesses, and residents in the community were really effective for being able to get folks who represent that particular community into the workshops. In addition, we pop up at community events, local grocery stores, table at public libraries, just to name a few. Applicant, as well as survey data, were analyzed via Microsoft Excel using formulas and pivot tables. The descriptive analyses did not include a complex process that required a statistical software package such as Stata, SPSS, or SAS.

These applicants really represent an ideal candidate for our work, especially given that the majority of them are Black women who occupied various leadership roles in their own communities and are intrinsically inspired to lead. We have learned that when folks are completely disengaged, it takes a lot for them to get engaged and much more preparation and training might be needed. We looked for the participant that had a desire and heart to be more involved in their community but were not necessarily as invested as they would like to be. Our vision of an ideal candidate is someone who has an interest in learning and is inquisitive. This does not mean knowing much about research; instead, it means the ideal candidate is curious and interested in learning.

I wanted to analyze the applicant data for the purpose of this dissertation to see what kind of participants the Black Researchers Collective attracted, and whether the attributes and characteristics of those who gravitated toward us through our work reflected who we were as well. This is important because when we start thinking about the long-term impacts, we think about these characteristics and the bare minimum needed to be helpful in turning the wheel.

Although we had 155 people apply for the CWI program, 43 actually completed the program across our five communities: Bronzeville (n=11), South Chicago (n=6), South Shore (n=11), Washington Park (n=5), and Woodlawn (n=11). The reason why our sample sizes were

so small happened serendipitously. During the pandemic, when we kicked off our first workshop series in Bronzeville, our facility host partner was Build Bronzeville/Urban Juncture Foundation at the Bronzeville Incubator. We initially recruited close to 30 people but were told that we needed to cut that number in half because it was far too many people to meet COIVD-19 mitigation requirements. Our comrades reminded us that we were still in a pandemic which meant that we had to do our part in helping keep folks safe. As a result, we reduced our sample size and the number of staff in the room, which meant we ended up with a small cohort. When we observed the efficacy of that model and how essential it was to building camaraderie and community dealing with a topic that can be complex knowing we wanted to feel the energy of the room as people self-activated, we retained that strategy moving forward. Achieving that community and energy is much more difficult in an online platform. We also knew that we wanted to be able to reach folks who were at the younger and older end of the spectrum. Sometimes technology is an issue for the seasoned participants and literacy is an issue for the younger participants so by having people in the room, we could assist with some of the hands-on activities that required them to be using technology as to not exclude people who might otherwise fall on the other side of the digital divide. That was an essential component of our process so we were grateful to connect in person.

After every workshop, participants completed a post-workshop survey which was helpful in assessing what they learned, what skills contributed to their learning and their growth, and how we can improve our practice to be better in the future. I analyzed 129 surveys from 43 participants, primarily focusing on key demographic and select impact variables. See Table 4 for key demographic and impact variables from the post-workshop surveys.

Table 4. Post-Workshop Survey Data

Variable	Values	Total (*N*=43)	Frequency (%)

Race	Black or African American	35	80%
	Biracial/Multiracial*	4	9%
	Hispanic or Latino/a/x	2	5%
	American Indian or Alaskan Native	1	2%
	Asian	1	2%
	White	0	0%
	Missing	1	2%
Gender	Woman	32	73%
	Man	10	23%
	Nonbinary and/or Nonconforming	0	0%
	Prefer not to reply	2	5%
Education	College degree**	31	75%
	No college degree	11	25%
	Missing	2	0%
Person with a Disability	No	35	80%
	Yes	6	14%
	Unsure	2	5%
	Missing	1	2%
Age	18 – 35	15	34%
	36 – 55	17	38%
	55+	12	28%
Level of Community Engagement post workshop	Increased	38	86%
	Decreased	0	0%
	Unchanged or About the Same	6	14%
Level of Knowledge and/or Experience with Research post workshop	Increased	42	95%
	Decreased	0	0%
	Unchanged or About the Same	2	5%
Level of Knowledge and/or Experience with Policy post workshop	Increased	34	77%
	Decreased	0	0%
	Unchanged or About the Same	10	23%

*This identity value includes those who also identify as Black
**This value includes Associates and Professional Degrees

Many of the demographic findings of the workshop for cohort participants who completed the program were on par with the applicant data, with most applicants (89 percent) self-

identified as black, 73 percent were black women (but nearly a quarter were black men), and nearly an even distribution across age groupings (around a third in each group) with those between the age of 36 and 55 being highest represented. This is a reminder that the things that we experience on a micro level are very much a microcosm of things that are happening on a macro level. Some key differences that emerged pertained to education and ability. Our cohort participants were more educated than our larger sample (75 percent versus 60 percent). Unfortunately, data on (dis)ability wasn't collected prior to workshops. Most participants (80 percent) did not identify as a person with a disability. However, although 80 percent did not identify, I do just want to acknowledge that 19 percent of the sample either did identify as a person with a disability or were unsure whether they were a person with a disability. Although that might not seem like a large percentage, including this variable triggered an increased level of consciousness that I think that we should be having around ability in general as able-bodied people that may not always be front of mind. We didn't even have this question on the survey until we actually had a woman with a physical disability in our first workshop series. Her representation gave us an opportunity to be more inclusive, as we as Black women understand what it feels like to feel excluded and not be represented. Reflecting on the experience of being Black, woman, and a person with a disability made us be much more conscious in terms of making the decisions that we made with regard to the community facilities that we secured for the workshops, ensuring that they were ADA and tech accessible, at minimum, for the people that we served. This is not only a consideration that benefits people with disabilities but our seniors (aka seasoned sistas) as well. That perceivably small piece of data reflects the level of thoughtfulness we needed to have when we thinking about how to best serve our community; even if it's through how showed up at one point in time, we also must be a reflection of that too.

As for our key impact variables pertaining to community engagement, research, and policy, 86 percent reported that their level of community engagement *increased* as a result of the community workshop intensives; nearly all, 95 percent, reported that their level of

knowledge of and/or experience with research *increased* as a result of the community workshop intensive program; and 77 percent reported their level of knowledge of and/or experience with policy *increased* as a result of their participation in the Community Workshop Intensives so overall, participants left the workshops positively impacted by and through the process. To contextualize, workshop participants received curricula that included the history of their community and research, different approaches to research, qualitative and quantitative techniques, and vision and strategy-building toward a plan of action plan; specifically, a grassroots community civic impact project where they could leverage community organizing strategies and research tools to be able to give that project legs to activate in their communities. Over the course of 15 months, Black Researchers Collective conducted 60 hours of in-person trainings through our Community Workshop Intensives that led to the launching of 16 community-led projects across Bronzeville, Woodlawn, Washington Park, South Shore, and South Chicago. We partnered with over 12 community-based organizations and seven elected officials across the south side to execute our collective community and work with fidelity. In 2022, we provided paid employment opportunities to 19 people in some capacity to help carry out our work. This year, we plan to deepen our work in those five same south side communities to take the community civic impact projects to the next level.

While analyzing survey items for patterns of divergence, I found that, of the program participants who reported having unchanged knowledge, skills, and/or behaviors post-workshop intensive, nearly a quarter of them (23 percent or 10 out of 43) reported having about the same level of knowledge or experience with policy as they did prior to the workshop, suggesting that the program had no impact on some participants' knowledge or experience with policy. Of those reporting in this category, there was representation across all five of our communities with a diversity of age (from 24 – 73) and education backgrounds (from High School to Doctorate). Given that participants across all five of our communities rated themselves similarly, this finding also suggests that our education model lacks a strong connection to and/or amplification of

relevant policy. Of the program participants who reported having unchanged knowledge, skills, and/or behaviors, 14 percent (or six out of 43) reported having about the same level of community engagement as they did prior to the program. Of those in that category, they were all women between the ages of 34 and 74, representing three of our five communities (Bronzeville, South Shore, and Woodlawn). There were no patterns with regard to the education of the participants in this area. There were only two program participants who reported unchanged knowledge or experience with regard to research as a result of their participation in the Community Workshop Intensive. This particular category had more reports of increased knowledge and skills than the others.

To demonstrate the quality of the impact, I collected and analyzed 200 course journal reflections from 50 participants throughout the workshop process. The reason why the number of workshop participants doesn't align with the number of survey participants who completed the workshops is some participants who completed the reflection exercises, or journal prompts, did not complete the entire workshop series. Nevertheless, I felt it was still important to include their anecdotal contributions as a part of that process. The five reflection prompts are included below.

- Workshop 1: (1) What do you know about research? (2) What did you learn that you didn't previously know?
- Workshop 2: (3) What are the personal and/or professional assets that you bring to the table? How can those assets be best used in alignment with research tools to help successfully facilitate change in your community? (4) What did you learn today day that you didn't previously know, and why is it staying with them?
- Workshop 3: (5) What was the experience of designing a research study and plan of action like for you? If you have prior research design experience, describe how this experience has been similar or different from what you have done before?

The reflections are designed as such to level set at the beginning of the workshops. Post level setting, we encouraged people to think about the things that really center themselves in

their work. Reflecting on these questions helped them understand that who they are in the world is an asset, no matter how much they may have been told that they are not. No matter how much their skills and contributions have been minimized and diminished, this was really an opportunity for them to lean in and reflect on that to know, yes, they are somebody and there are tools in their invisible knapsacks that they can use that to strengthen their work in the ways they deeply desire. Often, as Black people, we don't really get the opportunity to just sit in that reflection space. Many of us can go our entire lives without anybody even asking us about what some of our personal or professional assets are. We're always made to feel as if we're working at a deficit, so that question was super important. Table 5 displays the relevant themes that emerged across journal entries at varying levels program exposure. The number of hours of program dosage have been included to pinpoint specific areas of growth as participants' exposure to BRC programming increased. You'll observe that as the number of program hours increase, participants are walking away with community, civic, and interpersonal skills and practices in addition to the research knowledge they're building. The themes listed are the key takeaways at various points in the programming. For example, if a participant came into the workshop articulating knowledge pertaining to the theme of research process and design, and after 10 hours indicated learnings relevant to the theme of research process and methodologies, that was an area that likely strengthened their practice. For example, one Bronzeville program participant came into the workshop sharing the following about what they know about research, "I know that research is important. Time consuming. Learning strategies and ways to share, growth, expand knowledge. Civic minded techniques." After 10 hours of the workshop, that same participant shared that what they learned that they didn't previously know and why it's staying with them was the following,

> "[Research] can be applied in my everyday life by me remembering to check my resources, to get data collection, analysis and always have a plan of action. Some of the techniques I already use but didn't know the technical names for them but now I do so I

can share my knowledge with others. I think that this was great learning experience and I am proud to say I was sort of on the ground breaking floor for this. I can't thank you all enough."

The way in which this participant spoke about their research knowledge was more comprehensive, specific, and detailed after 10 hours of programming. Another program participant from Washington Park shared that "research starts from forming a hypothesis, or rather a "question" around a particular topic or issue. Gathering data, and from that data forming more questions to ponder, and investigate." After 10 hours, she reported learning "about the various kinds of research that could be done, and the distinction between Qualitative, and Quantitative. Also, learning about how data dissemination can be used for good or bad, and how to change that narrative as researchers. In my current research project, my goal was to change how people of color view and process research and when done properly it can help and not harm. Today's lecture has confirmed that." The level of specificity, detail, relevance, and advancement of their research is clearer than before.

Though the evidence provided does not track dosage, or the extent of program exposure, at the individual participant level, these thematic learnings still provide helpful insight on what the participants took away from the workshops in real time and what curricula was most useful in their skill-building and development, speaking to the overall impact of the program. Journal reflections, as well as post-program interviews, were coded and analyzed via NVivo, a qualitative software program. The findings are being reported in the aggregate to protect the anonymity of participants.

Table 5. Journal Entry Themes by Program Dosage

Pre-workshop knowledge of research (One hr of dosage)	Post-workshop learnings (Five hrs of dosage)	Personal and professional assets (Six hrs of dosage)	Post-workshop learnings (10 hrs of dosage)	Experience designing a research study and plan of action (after 12 hrs of dosage)
Research Processes and Design	History and Context of Research in Black Communities	Leadership and Communication Skills	Research Processes and Methodologies	Personal and Professional Growth
Bias and Error in Research	Research Ethics and Methodologies	Research and Analysis Skills	Research Ethics and Bias	Research Skills and Methods
Research and its Impact on Society and Policies	Civic Engagement and Community Involvement in Research	Community Engagement and Organizational Skills	Community Engagement and Partnerships	Community Engagement
The Power and Subjectivity of Research	Complexity of Creating and Conducting Research	Professional Experience and Education	Data Collection and Analysis	Personal Experiences
The Role of Research in Education and Knowledge Expansion	Reactions and Impacts of Research on Communities	Personal Qualities and Life Experiences	The Purpose and Application of Research	Empowering
				Inspiring
				Impactful
				Relevant to Research Interests

Further demonstrating this, I've included some anecdotes from four of our five communities, each highlighting participant experiences in the Community Workshop Intensive, particularly their experience with regard to designing a research study and plan of action.

> *"My experience with this workshop has been amazing. I truly enjoyed each class. As someone that has not done academia in the research field, I learned a lot. From a principal understanding of research to a better understanding of qualitative and quantitative research. While getting into the basics and coming up with an action plan, from an abstract perspective, it made my vision clearer; analytically, I discovered so many more complex methods, material, and language involved which I would want to learn more about." - Bronzeville Community Workshop Intensive Participant*

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> *"Digging into a research study again is very empowering. I really am inspired to elevate my community engagement even more and keep persevering. It's also important to encourage others; I shared this opportunity and got one person to participate. Each one - teach one! I will look more into ways research can fuel my work in my community and keep bringing in more folks. This workshop intensive fell right in line with my prior research experiences. BUT this one was super relevant to my interests now." - South Shore Community Workshop Intensive Participant*

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> *"It really put things in perspective for me in regards to how I can use research to benefit my community. It was like seeing my thought[s] almost come to life - prior to the workshop I had no idea how I could be of better service to my community. I haven't had a prior experience [with research], but this was definitely a great experience for me, and has allowed me to be able to use these tools and other individuals to make my work see its potential." - Woodlawn Community Workshop Intensive Participant*

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"This was very simple and helpful for me. I enjoyed the collaboration, and resources given to assist us in the design process." - Washington Park Community Workshop Intensive Participant

Per their anecdotes, participants had a positive and impactful experience. Two of the three participants had no prior research experience yet they all had a similar experience in the workshops. The collective sentiments of the workshops being “amazing”, “empowering”, and a “benefit to community” indicates that no matter what experience they had prior to the workshops or how they’ve arrived, there was something to be gained.

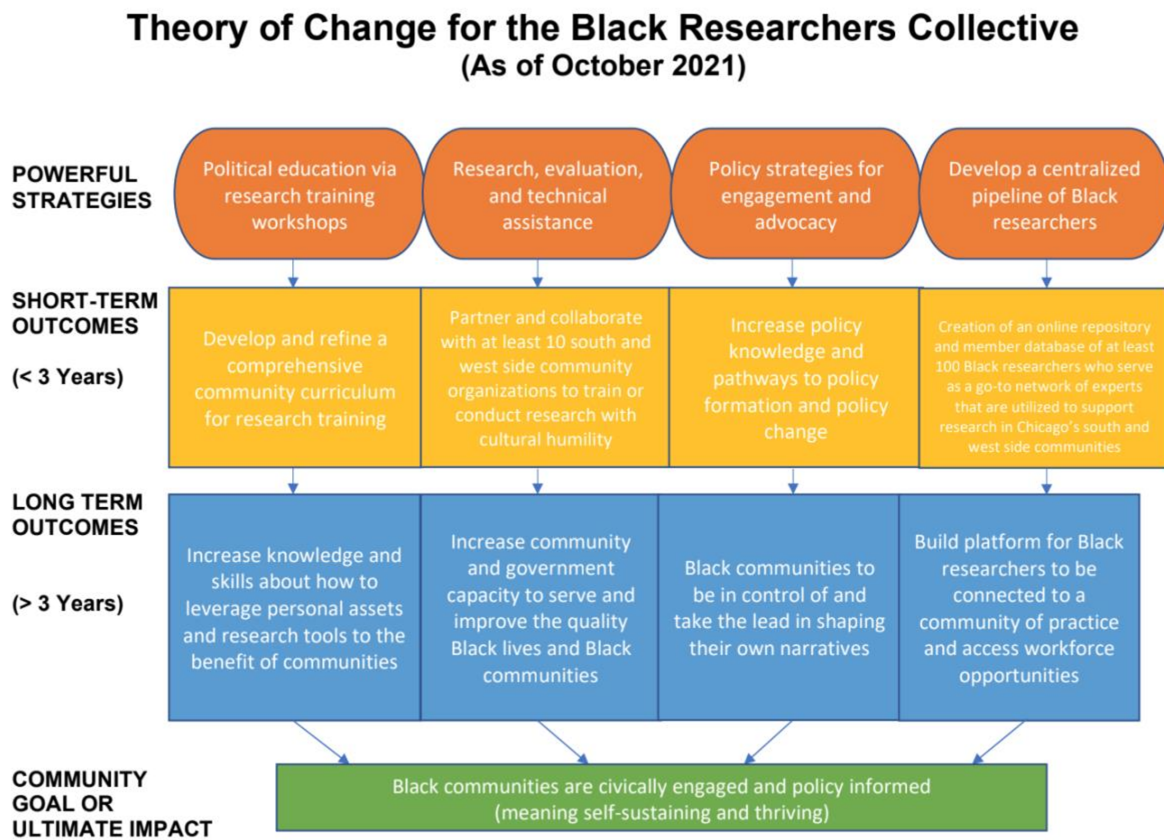
By the end of the workshop series, with a few hours of virtual project planning, all of our groups were able to start building grassroots civic impact projects to ideate. We did not experience any major contradictions or resistance in these journal entries but there were a number of respondents who had prior research experience, like the South Shore CWI participant above. Despite their prior experience, CWI community projects strengthened their practice and made research more practical and relevant. In addition, the biggest challenges for program participants was time (in general, people wanted more time) and the overwhelming amount of information in a short period of time yet they appreciated the value of the experience. One South Shore participant demonstrated this by sharing the CWI was, “Challenging given [the] short time. And awesome working in collaboration with smart folks on a community building project.” Another from Woodlawn even went as far to say, “Designing a research study was overwhelming (expressive aphasia) and informative. Could have used additional time to prep for presentation. I have no prior experience in research but I will be utilizing the knowledge that I gained in the workshop and apply to a plan that my community can benefit from.” Anticipating that some of these challenges might emerge, we designed these civic impact projects to find connective tissue between and among one another. I think this is why the small cohort model works best. If the group is too large and people are just coming and going, you don't have that same level of investment, which is intentionally designed to be a real reflection of how

communities operate. If you don't have any real personal investment in your community, then you don't have the same level of attachment and connection. As Charlene Carruthers (2018) articulated in her book *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements* about community organizing toward liberation, "...It requires people to be in ongoing and substantive public relationships with each other, people with shared interests, to work toward shared goals. When people have no stake in the work, they not only lose interest but can also be prone to marginalizing those with whom they claim to be in struggle." We've found, through the verbal anecdotes of participants while in the field and the journal entries, that throughout the course of the workshops people felt very connected to one another even though they were only together for 12 hours over a period of two Saturdays and a Wednesday night. They expressed this through the theme of collaboration. One South Chicago participant shared, "I like the collaboration. This was very unique. I like the regular reflections and I love the 90-day plan. Those two things in particular make this course very special." Another program participant from Bronzeville remarked, "I enjoyed this experience designing a research project. Working with [cohort comrade (and cohort comrade)] brought home the purpose of collaborative research with others in my community. Overall, I highly valued the opportunity to make research real for my people." As a result, we felt that the amount and quality of the content we provided, in terms of dosage, was just enough.

Overall, our Community Workshop Intensives, which is the meat and potatoes of our organization has been super impactful in the growth and development of our Collective, and subsequently, has been a thing that we are continuing to come back to. This community education model is central to the BRC's mission and Theory of Change toward contributing to the strengthening and sustainability of Black communities. It is the core of the work that we do because we believe that education opens new pipelines for access and opportunities to self-determination. The successful development and execution of community projects, after being tested in practice, is evidence of a model that works. This year, we plan to deepen our work in

communities to see the extent to which our assumptions about our education model may be true. Figure 1 showcases our Theory of Change, currently in the process of being revised based on what we've learned.

Figure 1. Black Researchers Collective's Theory of Change



Those who engaged with us also had an impactful experience. Post-programming, cohort participants continued to demonstrate that by applying for research-related job opportunities and being more engaged in their communities. Just this past December 2022, we had our first in-person Black Researchers Thought Summit, where we were able to bring together all of our cohorts from various communities, partner organizers, funders, and elected officials. That was really beautiful because cohort members across communities were able to talk about their work and some of the meaningful residual and longitudinal effects of our programming as a result of their participation. It was a bit emotional listening to them speak and

credit me for their reawakening and the lingering impact that has on other aspects of their lives. This was similar to the feedback that participants shared with us earlier in the year during our post-program interviews. The interview below speaks to them becoming more civically engaged as a result of the Community Workshop Intensive.

BRC: Do you feel like participating in this [workshop series] has changed the way in which you've specifically engaged with your community?

Stephanie: Oh yes. Because I wasn't thinking about doing anything in the third ward before. Certainly wasn't thinking about anything environmental <laugh>. So yes, I mean I feel like it just definitely changed, one helped me realize that with just myself. I wouldn't have realized it, or, I mean, I might have thought about it but it wouldn't have come home the way it did, and then I wouldn't have met [cohort comrade] any other way. Yeah, so…

Similar to the one above, many participants indicated a change in their civic behaviors post programming, suggesting that they were inspired to get activated as a result of their participation in the Community Workshop Intensive.

The final data source and set of findings that I want to mention in this chapter really speaks to the post-program impact. I leveraged a small sample of seven half-four interviews from the Bronzeville cohort over 90-days after their completion of their program, an example of which is listed above. Beyond the program, we do post-workshop follow-ups that include both 45-day office hours and interviews after the 90-day mark to see how their community projects are going and the extent to which they're activating the skills they learned in other capacities (see 90-Day Checklist in Appendix A). The findings from these interviews speak to both skill and civic project application as a result of their participation in the Community Workshop Intensive, an example of which is indicated in the passage below.

BRC: …Have you applied any of the research skills or tools that you learned in the workshop?

Maya: Yes, definitely. I think that's why I started working with the Park District in the first place due to the skills that I've learned within the workshops, that kind of prompted me to say, Hey, if I can’t do it in the way that I wanna do it, why don't we work with what's already out there? And I think a lot of that came from talking to Glenance, and talking to other community members like, Hey, look into the Park District, look into this. And it's like, Oh, okay, well let's start at Park District. And then that's when I stumbled upon, well, the advisory council. When I stumbled upon [it], my mom is on it. But just realizing what the advisory council is and certain things that I can do within the advisory council that would help me achieve that overall long-term goal.

This Bronzeville participant decided to immediately apply her skills at a Chicago Park District Park Advisory Council, providing a platform for her to extend and share what she learned in a community space accordingly.

Overall, the impact of the civic project application based on the interview findings were positive, as many project members have stayed in contact and were making progress, slowly but surely. However, remaining in contact and connecting for community activation was an issue for the Bronzeville Cohort which impeded progress, and ultimately the success, of the projects. During the interviews, one participant articulated this by stating the following.

Denise: Let's see. So I'm [cohort member name] and we started off with the food sovereignty, but one of our team members hasn't responded, so she and I have moved forward on a different topic basically trying to make Bronzeville climate resilient. So we're at the kind of beginning stages of that. So we'll see how that goes. I don't know, <laugh> sort of me doing the whole project by myself. I don't know, [cohort comrade] trying, so I just gotta keep nudging her. So I'm hopeful that we'll get something. I told her I wanna get it done by June, so I'm hopeful. Fingers crossed.

This cohort member had the passion and willingness but not the full participation of her team to support. Another cohort member had the full participation of her team but acknowledged that other life commitments were impeding progress. People were likely to step up and step back to the extent of their capacity. Sometimes, we don't always get the courtesy of the notification of the fall back because of shame or guilt for not being able to continue that commitment but, nevertheless, it yielded the same outcome. Some civic researchers had not been in touch with their cohort comrades much at all.

Raven: Our project centered around developing a community center for youth that focus on a couple of different areas. Yeah, I think we just mainly focus on the community center for the youth within Bronzeville. That's pretty much it, I think.

BRC: Okay. Have you been in contact with your group members?

Raven: I have. I've been in contact. I think we talked, [cohort comrade], we talked briefly about this after our session ended. And then I've been in contact with [other cohort comrade] as well. Yeah, so we've been in contact. I'm not gonna say that I haven't heard from anyone [or] haven't spoken to anyone since the conclusion of the classes. We have been in contact.

BRC: Would you say y'all made any progress or on y'all projects since the meetup? I mean, since the community meetings.

Raven: So since it was my brainchild, I had to put things on pause because I'm going through a lot right now. So I had to put that kinda on a back burner. But I have been doing other things that can contribute to it in a roundabout way. Just haven't been able to work on it, per se every day, all day. But I have done something towards it. I wrote out a plan, really fleshed it out a little bit more, but that's about it. And I kind of had to stop

> right there because again, some other things in my life took precedent over that. But it is still a work in progress and some of the things I'm doing right now, I’m actually contributing toward that.

Sometimes life gets in the way. Acknowledging this, and similar anecdotal feedback from participants, we recognized that many of these community projects did not get fully executed as anticipated so we leveraged this feedback to deepen our work in Fiscal Year 2023. Instead of rolling out a new set of workshops in a new set of communities, we decided to go back to those very same communities for another year and focus on activating those community projects as a sustainability effort in community. We recognize that these efforts take time and resources, so our year two community model includes incentivizing key milestones for progress and mobilization and a series of workshop intensives tailored toward the needs of the community project. We are currently in the process of interviewing all of our workshop participants to determine which projects will move forward as a result of the gaps in this work.

At the time of the interview, the projects were focused on various aspects such as community history and culture, language and social behavior, interagency for communities, climate resilience, a community center for youth, and environmental sustainability and resilience in the Bronzeville area. The findings suggest that skill application had a varying impact on a community, professional, and personal level. The following activities occurred with regard to participants activating their skills, post-workshop, in community: network building, joined a Park District Advisory Council and is now serving in a role of leadership, and using research skills and knowledge gained from the workshops to further their community goals. These goals included creating a community center for kids, promoting interagency collaboration, promoting community wellness and trauma, becoming more engaged in environmental issues, putting together a product with their team, finding grants, and identifying spaces for collaboration. The workshops were also seen as necessary to driving change within the community.

Participants reported applying the research skills they've learned professionally by using them in their work roles such as a manager for an afterschool non-profit to be more intentional about their program goals and outcomes. This finding is refreshing and reminding of the importance of carrying out research using scientific methods, and using resource tools provided by the workshop in their daily practice. One person even reported using the research skills and open source data collection and management platforms pertaining to better understanding data in their professional life as a teacher.

People applied the skills they gained through the intensives in their personal lives by exploring different pathways to community and environmental resilience, listening for information, using and spreading the information, understanding the importance of education and community engagement, and realizing the importance of education for effectively helping their community. Additionally, one person took a class on building leadership in communities. Not surprisingly, 100 percent of the interview participants (7 out of 7) indicated applying the skills they learned and the majority of interviewees (71 percent, or 5 out of 7) indicated feeling more civically engaged as a result of their participation in the Community Workshop Intensive. One example of this impact is best demonstrated through the experiences of the Bronzeville participant below.

BRC: Alright, so now we're gonna go into talking about some of the things that you've applied from what you learned in the trainings [during] the workshop intensives. So how have you applied any of the research skills and tools learned at the workshop?

Shaina: So I would say now I kind of view a lot of things as data <laugh>. So instead of just there having to be a research question I kind of take more things in. And then I also have been able to just look into different projects that have already been done in a community to just see I guess how we

can compare and contrast what we are trying to do and what's already been done.

BRC: What tools have you learned? Were you able to use the skill set that you had already knew differently post-workshop in your personal or professional…

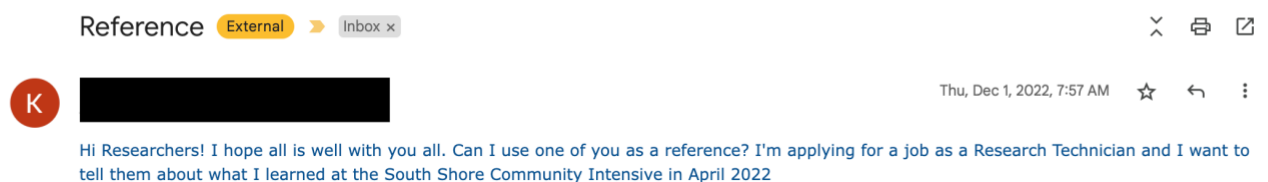
Shaina: Life? Well, I got a job with the Black Researchers Collective, so I used some of my skills that I learned in the workshop to help me.

BRC: Alright, cool. Great. Since you got hired, have you learned any new skills?

Shaina: Yes. So I've strengthened my just data collection skills. I've also strengthened, I would say my research skills and being able to either start a project and actually see it through, of course with help, but making an idea coming to life even if it's a small project. So I've also gained a little bit of social media skills and learning more tools that help either organize or figure out ways to make things simple.

BRC: That's wonderful. Life, man, life is about simplicity, trust me. <laugh>. All right, cool.

Generally speaking, people reported leaving the workshops feeling impacted, an experience that reverberated through other aspects of their lives. Participants reported they got the inspiration they needed to apply for research gigs, an example of which is demonstrated in the passage above and through an email sent to us by a South Shore participant in December 2022. Through this example, we can see the development of social networks and social capital being leveraged to the benefit of the participant.



Others told us that, despite their years in college, they didn't quite understand research until the Community Workshop Intensive. These experiences illustrate how research can feel pie in the sky to many, but once it is made accessible, participants could develop their research skills and be inspired to apply them in their everyday lives. One of the things that makes this so special is I put research in the context of our collective lived experiences, and make it make sense for our community, as illuminated through the experiences of the civic researchers; who we are as black people and the ways in which we learn and process information. Those are the things that make it make sense. When we made research relevant and accessible, I observed participants expressing excitement and even began to see and understand that data are everywhere. Through this process, participants also came to realize that they can have some control over their narrative and have everything they need for activation. It was in these moments that the fire inside of them is lit ablaze. They get super excited about what they can do and the possibilities become endless. The vignette is an example of how participants made relevant connections from research and data to their everyday lives.

BRC: Do you feel like the workshops were necessary to drive change?

Tami: Yeah, I think they should have been done sooner, but I wish it would've been done sooner cause it's necessary. But sometimes the plans for Bronzeville were set 10 years ago by officials and developers. So what's happening now is happening. But some of the policies, I know that one was about handicap accessible and stuff like that. Those ones will be more likely to create a fish and change than ones, like I say, that was already predetermined by policy and money. So some things are just gonna happen. But the goal for mine is [to] know more. I'm not naive to the fact that, oh, this is gonna change everything but if residents are more involved, and that's why [this is] a model for this community, and maybe if it's successful, other communities and people can be take more. Cause

> residents are stakeholders but a lot of people don't understand that they as individuals and parents have value as a resident, as a citizen. So things shouldn't be happening to you. They should be happening for you…[so] the answer is yes. I do think that something like this is needed towards communities and it was a great experience for us as adults, but it would be beneficial to teen and young adults as well because I feel like those are the people who, as far as change and involvement, they're the next leaders.

Here’s this thing that they did not even know they could control that has been dominated by those outside of their communities for so long, and now they’re realizing that they can have a piece of that too. Not only can they have a piece of it, but it is also theirs to own inherently, and they can decide whether or not they want to give it up in exchange for the needs and desires of somebody else.

Summary

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated—through the analysis of applicant data, post-workshop surveys, and post-program interviews—a bird’s eye view of the reach and impact that the Black Researchers Collective has had on the community that it serves; the tenets of which are a deep reflection of the Black women who lead the collective, including myself. A big part of what we're doing at the Black Researchers Collective is building people's capacity to show up for themselves so that people know that they don't have to rely on other people outside of their community to activate their work. They can rely on themselves. We have everything we need.

Academic institutions such as colleges and universities have traditional approaches to education. What is deemed valuable is predetermined by the educational structures of the academy, which is rarely in alignment with the communities that neighbor or are impacted by

schools of higher education. Research contributes to the generation of new knowledge and the deepening of fields of thought, many of which are only validated through participation in formal education programs and degrees that are perceived as credible, often excluding those who experience real barriers to accessing formal education settings, for various reasons, yielding inequitable outcomes. For years, scholars have been acknowledging this in their work. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, originally published in 1970, Paulo Freire (1970) discussed how educational structures can perpetuate oppression and inequality. Through a lens of critical pedagogy, he offers an education model that empowers people to challenge and transform these structures. Henry Giroux (2020), in *Critical Pedagogy,* critiques dominant power structures by emphasizing education as a tool for social transformation. Giroux discussed the importance of connecting critical pedagogy to broader social and political struggles and creating educational spaces that challenge oppression and promote social justice. In *Teaching to Transgress*, one of my personal favorites, bell hooks (2014) explored the ways in which educational institutions can reinforce or challenge systems of oppression, and advocates for a pedagogy that empowers students to think critically and challenge dominant ideologies. In Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) article "But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy" she argued for a pedagogy that is grounded in the cultural experiences and practices of students from diverse backgrounds and offers examples of how this approach can support academic achievement and empowerment. The educational work of the Black Researchers Collective, through its Community Workshop Intensives and the experiences of our program participants, is a reflection of those models that they spoke of. Although we haven't been around for a very long time, it is emblematic of critical pedagogy.

Our alternative model to education, deeply critical and inherently political, are rooted in our collective lived experiences and radical Black feminist values and ideologies. As evidenced through the data, the educational practices that we espouse are of value and significance to our communities. As demonstrated in this chapter, these early years of the Collective have yielded

successes. Despite the positive outcomes of this model, nearly a quarter of our participants (23 percent or 10 out of 43) reported having about the same level of knowledge or experience with policy as they did prior to the workshop, suggesting (1) that the program had no impact on some participants' knowledge or experience with policy and (2) our education model lacks a strong connection to and/or amplification of relevant policy. Given our mission to train and equip communities with research tools to be more civically engaged and policy informed, this is very much an area of necessary improvement.

I liken my role as the primary workshop facilitator as simply that person coming into a dark room and turning on the light. I'm not giving you anything, I'm not taking away anything. I am simply illuminating what has already been there in the darkness for quite some time. At various points throughout the chapter, I have also highlighted key decisions that were made as a result of the cultural assets that we bring to the table in consideration the cultural context in which we share our lived experiences. Each and every one of these decisions only made our work stronger, and the impact more useful and meaningful. The next chapter pulls back the hood and details how decisions are made in our little engine that could. It also attempts to showcase a phenomena, centered around the cultural values and leadership practices of Black women both within and external to the collective. The relevance of our work and how we're doing it at the Black Researchers Collective doesn't exist in a vacuum. Although we are special, the ways in which we're working through our freedom struggles are not unique to us. Black women have been doing this for years.

Chapter Five
How Black Women Lead: A Labor of Love

"The light of love is always in us, no matter how cold the flame. It is always present, waiting for the spark to ignite, waiting for the heart to awaken and call us back to the first memory of being the life force inside a dark place waiting to be born—waiting to see the light." — bell hooks, *All About Love*

Introduction

When I reflect on all of the pivotal moments that supported me leveling up in my career and life, and the people who had the most profound impact on me, it has been Black women. Black women who didn't provide guidance because they felt they had to. They didn't show up for me because that's what they were being paid or told to do. They simply did it as a labor of love. No matter how often Black women are disrespected, they still show up as a labor of love. No matter how much others deem their perspectives as invaluable yet turn around and take credit for their contributions, they remain vigilant and dedicated, as a labor of love. People spend their entire careers taking advantage of endless professional development opportunities to learn how to lead, and still come up short with regard to being a good leader. But, Black women, often without formal training or a tiered system of structured supports, find the skills to lead…and lead well. Not from some book they read, although many of us love a good story, but from their lived experiences that taught them how to lead with love.

My mother always said, "When you do the right things for the right reasons, you get the right results." That was an adage in my household that was said so much that I could repeat it in my sleep. What she was teaching me way back then was that everything must be done with integrity, thoughtfulness, and a pure heart. Everything must be done with love. I didn't understand it then but it is the value within that guides my practice now, and has been for quite some time. She'd also say, "When you got your hand in the lion's mouth, you gotta wrestle easy to get it out." What that meant was that when you're facing a tough time, you don't fight fire with fire, you fan the flames with love. It was an adage that was given to her from her mother, and

one that was likely given to my grandmother from hers, just as it will be passed down to my children one day. And her personal favorite was, “There’s more than one way to skin a cat.” I never understood why we would want to be skinning cats but did come to understand that what she meant by that was there’s always more than one way to get things done. She was training me from an early age that one size does not fit all so it’s best to not limit myself to the expectations and standards of others. By only focusing on one way, their way, the possibility of failure was greater than odds of the impossible. I didn’t know it at the time but that Black woman, my mother, raised by a southern sharecropper from Arkansas who couldn’t read or write until later in life, was preparing me how to lead. A skill that came from my grandmother’s great-grandmother who was slave; one who didn’t have a voice in her body as Black and woman, except for the words she spoke with her children. More importantly, my mother was preparing me how to lead a purposeful life as a good human being.

As I go through life, I have met other Black women who have similar stories of the Black women in their lives, their mothers and grandmothers, the village who raised them. Though in different forms, they too received similar messaging, about themselves and their conduct. At an early age, many of us were culturally socialized to be accountable to others and simultaneously lead with love. This cultural socialization has permeated through every aspect of my life, and has made me the woman, the leader that I am today. Leadership skills that I bore shame of for a long time in white-led spaces because they were perpetually challenged and critiqued by the intimidation of mediocrity. In Black spaces, with my people, I can shine bright as my authentic self and lead as my mother led by example. Perhaps it is the same for other Black women who were socialized like me.

This chapter deepens my exploration of how Black women leading Black-led organizations (BLOs) are working toward Black liberation and amplifies the characteristics or attributes that exist across Black-led organizations (BLOs) through the lens of Black women internal and external to the Black Researchers Collective. Radical Black feminist Diane Grimes

(2001) argues that perspectives on change would benefit from a consideration of work by and about Black women since little is known within organization studies. She argues this in hopes that organizations and research methods might be reimagined to the end goal of changing systems to meet basic needs, social and organizational change, and changing the dominant culture. Moreover, she emphasizes the importance of paying attention to those typically ignored by taking a closer look at Black women's self-valuation and self-definition, as we are and have always been powerful change agents (Grimes, 2001). This chapter seeks to provide additional evidence for this field objective.

The Weaving—Part II: Sampling, Data Analyses, and Key Findings

From July 2021 through June 2022, I was very intentional about capturing data through the Black Researchers Collective for the purpose of this dissertation. As a result, the data used for this chapter exclusively focuses on three data sources: (1) organization board meetings, (2) interviews with staff and board members of the Black Researchers Collective, and (3) interviews with Black women leading Black serving organizations in Chicago. In the early days of our convenings, my team and I discussed how necessary it was to start recording our meeting sessions. We discussed this, not because we thought we were sharing something earth shattering, but because we found the process of developing community initiatives from the seed of an idea and collective vision to be challenging and murky and messy, and we wanted to share that experience with others so that they might hear our process and feel comforted in knowing that they were not alone. We viewed understanding the process as central to expanding organizational theory and to enhancing our own organizational capacity. The question as to whether we should record our meetings was put to rest when we found ourselves deeply impacted by the stressors of COVID-19. Focusing our efforts on how to best meet the divergent needs of Black communities during long periods of exacerbation became much more of a priority as we worked to build a foundational structure that could be amendable to progress

despite the conditions of our collective struggle. When I did start recording our meetings in July 2021, with the permission of board members who were happy to help contribute to this dissertation process, we decided that these recordings would also serve as virtual observations of our practices to be used for reflection and continuous improvement. The board met at least once a month, sometimes multiple times a month, since we first convened as a whole group in December 2019. This chapter leverages ten board meetings over a period of a year, between July 2021 and June 2022, with a specific focus on the pattern of themes and topics discussed and how key decisions in the organization are made. These ten meetings were up to two hours long and were transcribed to accurately capture all parties accordingly.

I also conducted interviews with members of the Black Researchers Collective and Black-led organizations between March and September 2022. I interviewed five Collective board members and three staff members, including myself, who worked at the Black Researchers Collective at the time of the interview. I conducted these interviews to better understand the experiences, practices, attributes, and skills of Black women leading internally within the Collective. Similarly, my interviews with members of Black-led organizations sought to capture the experiences, practices, attributes, and skills of Black women leading external to and independent of the Collective. For the Collective interviews, I used a purposive sampling approach (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016), which meant I deliberately selected participants based on my desire to understand the practices of the Black women impacted by and contributing to the Black Researchers Collective. For the BLO interviews, I used a combination of purposive, convenient (Etikan et al., 2016), and snowball sampling (Cohen et al., 2007) approaches. The primary selection criterion that I had for BLO interviews was that they needed to be a Black woman leading a Black serving organization. I loosely defined what constituted “leading” to be inclusive of organization founders who no longer served in a leadership role within the organization but still served as a thought partner and whose past and continued leadership contributed to the working practices of the organization.

Acknowledging that many scholars have written about the importance of leadership, particularly as it pertains to program development, sustainability, and continuous improvement, I also wanted to be inclusive of staff, independent contractors, and thought partners who led key operational tasks and programmatic functions of organizations. It was not unique to leadership role, per se, rather their contributions, which are often undermined, dismissed, and overlooked as leadership in white-led organizations (Byrd, 2009). Moreover, as we think about what's necessary for organizational growth and sustainability, it is important to recognize that good leaders are continuously improving, or tweaking and making modifications for best alignment, as they go. Tony Bryk et al. (2015) argue that leadership is key to driving improvement efforts, including the need for leaders to create a culture of continuous improvement, set ambitious improvement goals, and engage in ongoing improvement work. They argued for a design-based approach that includes collaborative learning, frequent data analysis, and iterative experimentation. They discussed this in the context of schools, but schools are also organizations so there is relevance here. Eleanor Drago-Severson (2009) focuses on the important role of leadership in supporting the professional development and growth of adult learners in educational environments. Her development approach not only involves creating and supportive and collaborate learning environment but also recognizes the unique experiences, skills, and needs of adult learners. Michael Dantley and Linda Tillman (2006) argue that leadership for social justice requires a focus on moral principles and a commitment to challenging systems of oppression and addressing systemic barriers. They proposed a framework for "moral transformative leadership" that emphasizes the importance of creating a shared vision for social justice, building relationships based on trust and respect, and promoting critical reflection and action. Examples of moral transformative leaders in education include Paulo Friere and bell hooks, whose contributions to the field were articulated in Chapter Four. Lastly, I think it's important to mention the relevance of culturally responsive and equity-focused leadership here, as it prioritizes equity and justice in all aspects of organizational decision-

making and implementation (Scanlan and Lopez, 2014). Black women have been instrumental in developing and promoting equity-focused leadership practices, particularly in the areas of education and social justice. It takes a village of these leadership approaches to successfully work toward collective liberation. Taken together, this study leverages an understanding and manifestation of all these leadership approaches in the context of our collective work as Black women leading Black serving organizations. Finally, I chose to focus on those leading Black organizations, specifically, because they're often spaces in which Black women don't have to negotiate who they are to lead as their ambition and hearts desire, a barrier and common dilemma faced by women of color in the workplace across the nation (Purushothaman et al., 2022).

I used purposive sampling to determine the ideal candidate for the BLO interviews. I employed a convenient sampling approach for recruiting and selecting participants. I primarily leveraged my personal and professional networks to reach out to Black women who I knew met the required criteria for sample selection, many of whom I've had some direct engagement with. Finally, a snowball sampling approach was leveraged, tapping my co-founder from another generation to support, to recruit Black women who I had no direct access to but could provide tremendous insights, particularly Baby Boomers in high-ranking leadership positions with over 20 years of experience. For this part of the research study, I interviewed 16 Black women interviewed, all of whom primarily served the south and/or west sides of Chicago. In total, I interview twenty-four Black women were interviewed. I transcribed each interview and then coded and analyzed the transcripts using NVivo. The findings are being reported in the aggregate and the names were changed to maintain anonymity.[11] Table 6 displays the demographic attributes of those who participated in the interviews.

[11] First, I reviewed transcripts of the interviews for clarity and identified themes that might be included in the coding structure. Second, I coded transcripts using NVivo, a qualitative research software. Third, I created summaries and data displays to examine key trends and differences.

Table 6. Demographic Attributes of Interview Participants

Variable	Values	Total (*N*=24)	Frequency (%)
Age	26 - 35	7	29%
	36 - 44	9	37%
	45 - 54	3	13%
	55+	5	21%
Leadership Role	Founder role*	17	71%
	Non-founder role	7	29%
Role Tenure	Under 5 years	16	67%
	5 - 10 years	5	21%
	10+ years	3	13%
Org Age	Under 5	12	50%
	5 - 10 years	7	29%
	11 - 20 years	2	8%
	Over 20 years	3	13%

* This includes those with founder, co-founder, and founding member status

The majority of the women interviewed (66 percent) were under the age of 44, with all of them being Millennials with the exception of one Gen Z. This reflects a younger generation of Black women in key organizational leadership roles. However, the majority of the Black women occupying key leadership roles (71 percent) served, in some capacity, organizations that they either founded, co-founded, or was a founding member of, suggesting that they opted to lead in ways most meaningful to them. Regardless of their formal titles, their role responsibilities included a purview of administration tasks, operations and infrastructure, community engagement and connection, and visioning and leadership. These responsibilities often involved building community connections and engagement in the organization's direction and success; assisting in the development of materials and providing support for various organizational functions such as fundraising, proposal writing and review, and social media engagement; conducting research and utilizing it to inform and improve communities; supporting and participating in community workshops and events to gather feedback and assess community needs; being accountable and providing value to the community as a Black woman; and playing a role in establishing a solid foundation for the organization.

The majority of Black women (67 percent) interviewed had served in their current leadership role for under five years, and most of the interviewees (88 percent) had served in their role under 10 years. At the time of the interviews, half of the Black women had been serving in a fairly new organization that had been established within the last five years. The majority of Black women (79 percent) had been serving in organizations that have been around up to 10 years. Overall, many of the study participants were younger Black women serving in key leadership roles in fairly new organizations, many of which they founded or contributed to founding.

Despite my sampling approaches, by no means did I intend to curate a sample that was characteristically a reflection of our organization. It serendipitously turned out that way. Despite the similarities, the missions and core work of each Black-led organization that women were affiliated with varied. Overall, their core areas of work aimed at empowering and uplifting the Black community. These areas of focus included entrepreneurship, healthcare, cultural preservation, anti-blackness, community building, research, and policy change. Here are some examples of the incredible work that Black women are endeavoring across the city.

- Unlocking the self-determining power of Black youth through entrepreneurship: This is being accomplished by providing resources and support for young Black people to start and grow their own businesses, thereby strengthening ties to their communities and creating economic opportunities.
- Providing high-quality medical care to Black people: This is crucially addressing the health disparities that exist within the Black community and ensuring that Black people have access to the best care possible.
- Preserving the legacy and history of Black Chicago: It serves to honor the contributions of those who have fought for civil rights and freedom and keeps their memory alive for future generations.

- Empowering and building community through promoting and preserving black culture, thinking, and contributions: This is being achieved by creating accessible spaces for art and community engagement, as well as addressing issues of anti-blackness and promoting positive representations of Black people and culture.
- Building capacity and empowering communities through research and data-driven impact: This includes assisting communities in identifying areas for improvement and providing tools for addressing them, making research accessible to communities, and impacting policies and decision-making.
- Developing a pipeline for Black researchers and codifying community-based research: This includes engaging and holding city leaders accountable to their constituents and empowering them to make policy change within their community.

These are the core ways in which Black women are working toward Black liberation in Chicago. Collectively, this work seeks to improve the lives of Black people and ensure that our voices and contributions are recognized and valued.

Black-Led Liberation

Similar to the overall sample, the demographic attributes of the Black Researchers Collective are reflective of these findings suggesting that we are not alone on this journey. Black women are finding innovative ways to get free through the normative constructs of work in unconventional ways. If we must work, it will be the work of our hearts, the work that we love. After all, few rarely love the concept of work. If we cannot do the work that we love, we will create it. Herein lies the labor of love. This is precisely how the Black Researchers Collective came to be. When Black women external to the Black Researchers Collective were asked what being a Black-led organization means to them their responses fell into five primary categories, in no particular order (*N*=16): (1) Black leadership and decision-making power, (2) focus on Black liberation, (3) prioritizing and amplifying Black voices, (4) cultural inclusion and community

focus, and (5) representation and leadership within the organization; concrete examples of which are included under each below.

1) **Black leadership and decision-making power.** The passage below illuminates the desire and necessity for Black leadership and decision-making in Black-led organizations. Black leadership and decision-making power is crucial in ensuring that the perspectives and needs of Black communities are centered and addressed. This category emphasizes the need for Black people to have agency and control in shaping their own futures.

Glenance: In your opinion, what does it mean to be a Black-led organization or BLO?

Cherelle: Yeah. Um, <laugh> leading, leading with Black. Um, and when I say that, what I mean is, um, and I'll give some context about what, how this makes sense in my mind. Um, when I started the work, I was very clear on like, we've gotta do work for us. Um, and I don't know who we're waiting on to do it for us, but if we don't do it ourselves, nobody is going to catch on. And even if they do, they don't have the context, they don't understand the nuances. They're not in the experience to really design and lead for our communities the way that we are just inherently designed to understand and lead our communities. And so, uh, when I started [my organization], I, out the gate, it's Blackly Black. We work with Black people, we are Black, Everything we do is Black. Um, and it was jarring to a lot of people because honestly, at the time, I can't, off the top of my head, I can't recall any non-profits that were leading that way. It was always underserved youth or disadvantaged youth, or whatever word people use to try to like, get away from saying Black. Um, and I just was very clear on like, nope, this is for Black people. Anyone can join and y'all can come, but this is a Black experience. And so for me, it again, it is, it is

being, being a beacon, being a vessel, being a resource to our communities, for our communities, and being able to leverage, um, your own lived experience to drive and move that work forward.

Cherelle highlights the importance of Black leadership and decision-making power in serving and uplifting Black communities. She emphasizes the need for Black people to take ownership of their own work and create solutions tailored to their specific needs and experiences. She rejects the tendency of non-profits to use euphemisms to avoid directly addressing Black issues and instead center their work on being "Blackly Black," as she believes that Black people have a unique understanding of their communities that is essential to effective leadership and resource allocation. This demonstrates the power of Black leadership and the necessity of centering Black voices in decision-making processes.

2) **Focus on Black liberation.** This passage showcases the values of Black-led organizations with a focus on Black liberation that highlights a larger goal of dismantling systemic oppression and achieving equity for Black people. Black-led organizations prioritized this goal and worked toward it through various means such as advocacy, education, and community organizing.

Glenance: In your opinion, what does it mean to be a Black-led organization or a BLO?

Adina: It means to literally have Black people, Black identifying people or people that identify as Black to be leaders of an organization, to be the primary people that make decisions about the organization and how it strategically moves forward. In its general sense, [that's] what it means. However, then there is the caveat of [how] I would like to identify self, and my organization is not only Black-led, but it has a focus of the beautiful term that you have mentioned already of Black liberation. So I think those

are the two kinds of distinct ways in which I would describe a Black-led organization. Because being a Black-led organization, even if Black liberation is not the mission, just existing as a Black organization, is definitely contributing to Black liberation. Whether that's the mission or deliverable at all.

A focus on Black liberation is reflected here through the discussion of what it means to be a Black-led organization. Adina explains that, in a general sense, having Black people as the primary decision-makers constitutes a Black-led organization. However, she also adds a caveat that her organization not only has Black leaders but also has a focus on Black liberation. She further clarifies that even just existing as a Black organization is contributing to Black liberation, regardless of whether it is the mission or deliverable of the organization. This further emphasizes the importance of having Black leadership in organizations and how it contributes to the broader goal of Black liberation.

3) **Prioritizing and amplifying Black voices.** The passage below demonstrates how Black-led organizations understand prioritizing and amplifying Black voices as essential in creating a platform for Black people to be heard and have their experiences and perspectives valued. Black-led organizations prioritize creating spaces where Black people can speak their truth and be heard, particularly in a society where Black voices are often silenced, ignored, and/or shamed.

Glenance: In your opinion, when you think about, cause we talk a lot, you and I have been talking a lot about Black-led organizations and Black-led spaces in the work that we're doing. What does it mean to you to be a Black-led organization or BLO?

Sharon: What does it mean to me to be associated with them?

Glenance: Oh, when you hear Black-led organization, what does that mean to you?

Sharon: I guess when I think about Black-led, it means that, you know, [we] are

> giving credit to the folk who are at the head of it and who are the thought leaders of the work in which that organization will be performing. And in that context, these are people and leaders who hopefully have a Black lens in terms of how they not only execute their work, but how they think about their work. And in that regard, really thinking about the Black struggle, thinking about Black constituents, we are not a monolith, but it's important I think when you talk about a Black-led organization that people who are at the top of the pyramid making these decisions and really having a certain point of view and theory of change is going to be moved out throughout the organization. And so it's, it's very different in terms of how a Black-led organization should be thinking about its work and thinking about how to influence employees in terms of what they are thinking about. But, ultimately even if that Black organization, Black-led organization has constituencies that are multiracial at the same time, looking at things primarily in a way that is not just going to lift up all boats, but, in particular, looking at Black people and making sure that we are celebrated. And that just doesn't happen that often. The respect, the celebration, and to make sure that there is equity. And a lot of times those things slip through the cracks, but if it's intentional in that way, I think it really makes a huge difference.

Sharon highlights the importance of prioritizing and amplifying Black voices within Black-led organizations by suggesting that Black leadership at the helm should have a Black lens in how they execute and think about their work, with a focus on the Black struggle and Black constituents. Even if the organization serves a multiracial community, it is important to intentionally center and celebrate Black voices and ensure equity. The need

for intentional and conscious efforts to prioritize Black perspectives and voices within Black-led organizations is essential.

4) **Cultural inclusion and community focus.** This next passage illustrates cultural inclusion and community focus that emphasize the importance of valuing and celebrating Black culture and community. Black-led organizations create spaces that affirm Black identity and foster a sense of community among Black people.

Glenance: Just curious, in your opinion, what does it mean to be a Black-led organization or what I'm calling a BLO?

Jerelyn: So as a member of [my sorority] which is a Black Greek-letter organization, it's very similar. It's the fact that you are in a space where you can lead from a common sense of culture and now have to translate it to somebody else to then put it in terms that the community can understand. So it's a shortcut, it's a recognition of accomplishment and progress. It's a way to tap into the needs of the community without having to code switch. So being Black-led says a whole lot of things. It says that you stood on the shoulders of somebody to get to where you are. It says that you've developed some trust with the community to continue to hold that post because oftentimes we can be most critical of ourselves. And then lastly that idea of code switching. You get to eliminate that in many ways in the work because you don't have to translate what you're trying to do through the eyes of others or through the white gaze in order to get to the objective of the organization, which for us is legal services. So being Black-led comes out in our practice and in our work, but also it's a signal to the other community that we have the competency, the capacity, as well as the passion to be able to lead organizations effectively and efficiently.

This emphasizes the importance of cultural inclusion and community focus within Black-led organization. Jerelyn highlights how being a part of BLOs provides a shortcut to leading from a common sense of culture and eliminates the need for code-switching to translate ideas to others. Being Black-led signifies trust with the community and the ability to lead organizations effectively and efficiently. This suggests that Black-led organizations have the competency, capacity, and passion to tap into the needs of the community and provide services without having to view their work through the lens of the white gaze. To this end, cultural identity and community focus is a crucial lifeline for Black-led organizations.

5) **Representation and leadership within the organization.** The last passage describes a representation and leadership within the organization that highlights the importance of Black people holding leadership positions within the organization. This category recognizes that having Black people in leadership roles not only brings diverse perspectives but also ensures that the organization remains accountable to Black communities.

Glenance: Um, so I'm curious, in your opinion, what does it mean to be a Black-led organization or BLO?

Loreal: <laugh> In my opinion, what does it mean to be a Black-led organization? Uh, it means to uphold and uplift Black identities. Um, and be able to recognize that your, your community is super broad because Blackness is super broad. And not be afraid to say things like, we're Black-led versus we're serving people of color cause we're not. Yeah. Right. Like Black folks. I think, I think being Black-led is also, um, it's about not only the like staff leadership, but also the board leadership and also the intended, the, the intended community of like what you're trying to do. Like it's, it's Black-led but if you're like, not actually, you know, considering topics that

> impact Black people uniquely you, I think it, I think that becomes something slightly different. Um, cause you can talk about, you can be Black-led and have all the Black people on staff…and board. But if your issues are not framed in a way that recognizes the unique impact of Blackness on whatever issue it is, I think that there's a little bit of a disconnect, but it doesn't, I guess I wouldn't say that negates it being Black-led, but I think that's, it's probably the difference between being Black-led and being Black-centered. Like you can be Black-led and not Black-centered. Um, but I think Black leadership, you know, I think the psychosocial experience of being Black is, is unique to, is, is, is a unique experience. And, um, yeah, I think those are the broadest things that I can think of.

This relates to the theme of representation and leadership within Black-led organizations by discussing the importance of upholding and uplifting Black identities, recognizing the broadness of the Black community, and framing issues in a way that recognizes the unique impact of Blackness. Loreal emphasizes that being Black-led goes beyond having Black people on staff and board, but also involves considering the intended community and the unique psychosocial experience of being Black. They also distinguish between being Black-led and Black-centered, highlighting the importance of centering Blackness in the organization's mission and activities. This underscores the importance of representation and leadership that truly reflects and uplifts the diverse experiences of Black people, and our communities.

As these interviews demonstrate, participants viewed a Black-led organization as a place where the leadership and decision-making power is primarily held by Black people. It should have a focus on Black liberation and contribute to it, whether or not it is the mission of the organization. It's an organization that prioritizes and amplifies the

voices, needs, and perspectives of the Black community. It's an organization where Black-identifying people are the leaders and primary decision-makers and create a Black-centered safe space for all people, but especially for Black women to be themselves without judgment inclusive of fighting for civil rights within black spaces; putting the needs and perspectives of the Black community at the center of the work and being rooted in Black liberatory politics.

Similarly, when the Black women of the BRC were asked the same question, their responses reflected a shared sentiment. Collectively, a Black-led organization is one that (1) prioritizes and serves the needs of the Black community, (2) the leadership and decision-making bodies are primarily made up of Black people, (3) is focused on education, knowledge sharing, and resources with black women, with the goal of expanding to help all Black people, (4) is rooted in community organizing and led by Black women, and (5) is unapologetically Black and actively involves and serves Black people in the decision-making process. Naturally, 100 percent of the women across the sample reported that they consider their organization to be a Black-led organization based on how they defined Black-led for themselves.

Black scholars such Patricia Hill Collins (2009), Nikki Giovanni (1971), Alexis DeVeaux (Tate, 1983), and Sherley Anne Williams (1979) all speak to the importance of self-definition for Black women in their work. For Collins (2009), Black women have historically been defined by others, particularly white men and women, which has led to our experiences and perspectives being ignored or erased therefore self-definition is a way for Black women to resist this and assert our own experiences and perspectives. For Giovanni (1971), self-definition is important for Black people in a society that often seeks to marginalize and exclude us. She celebrates the power of self-creation and self-expression, emphasizing the need for people to assert their own identities in a world that often seeks to erase us. Black feminist poet Alexis DeVeaux (Tate, 1983) argues that self-definition is a way for Black women to assert our own identities and experiences, to create our own narratives and reject the dominant narratives that seek to define

us. Speaking in the context of the blues, Williams (1979) discusses a genre of music as a powerful tool for self-definition, as it allows Black people to express their experiences and emotions in a way that is not constrained by dominant narratives or cultural norms.

Though the Black women in this study are speaking to the context of their organizations, in many ways they are also speaking to that which reflects themselves. In fact, both women internal and external to the BRC explicitly mentioned Black women in their definitions by articulating a need for the "acknowledgement of women within", which suggests that when they think of a Black-led organization, they see themselves. This meaning making is pivotal to the work, and crucial to our role within it. Decoteau Irby (2021), who focuses on organizational practices and equity-focused school leadership, argues that racial equity improvement "requires creating organizational conditions that make racism visible and challenges white supremacy so that it becomes difficult for racist structures, policies, thinking, and behaviors to remain intact." Imagine what is possible when organizations and their foundational frameworks are designed to intentionally address and improve racial equity to begin with. When I landed on my research questions for the study, I was hesitant to define Black liberation for Black women, recognizing that how we show up in the work is connected to our own understanding and definitions of Black liberation, as my own definition is linked to Afrofuturism because I imagine a future in which we are free from racism and capitalism, are able to create and define our own narratives for ourselves, and build toward the future we seek because we believe it's possible (Womack, 2013; Anderson, 2016; Dery, 1994), Instead, I decided to lean into the definitions of the Black women a part of this sample. These definitions have been codified and organized into five major themes, highlighted in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Definitions of Black Liberation

BLO Interviews (*n*=14)	Collective Interviews (*n*=8)
The removal of systemic barriers and achieving freedom and access for Black people to achieve their goals and aspirations.	Black autonomy, including access to resources and opportunities to reach full potential without societal pressures or historical barriers.
Honoring the legacy and struggles of previous generations and continuing the fight for liberation.	Education and self-development as key to liberation, including the importance of healing.
Control and self-sustainability within the Black community, including control of resources, education, security, healthcare, and finances.	Community self-reliance and unity in achieving collective success.
The ability to fully express oneself and discover one's purpose as a Black person without societal limitations.	Intersectionality and a focus on specific issues within Black communities, including economic development and environmental safety.
Acknowledging the United States' history of slavery and its ongoing effects on the Black community, as well as the need for systemic change and reparations. Additionally, achieving peaceful existence, having control over resources and structures of a free community, and leaving a legacy for future generations.	Reparations and acknowledgement of harm caused by American systems, and the need for perspective change and new systems to uplift and empower Black people.

There is significant overlap with regard to how Black women define Black liberation for themselves. Patricia Hill Collins (2009) argues that when Black women's very survival is at stake, such that creating independent self-definitions becomes essential to that survival. Although these definitions were shared independently, collectively, they speak the same the truths. As a result, I have arrived at one singular definition forged from the self-definitions of most of the Black women in the study, including myself (n=22). That definition is as follows: Black liberation refers to the removal of systemic barriers that prevent Black people from achieving their goals and aspirations, and involves honoring their legacy, controlling their resources and community, achieving self-expression and education, addressing historical harm and reparations, and promoting intersectionality and community unity. Moving forward, when I refer to Black liberation, this is the definition that I am referencing. Demonstrating this, one BLO leader Michelle shared that the following comes to mind when they hear the term black liberation.

Michelle: Quality of life. Um, that's, that's like my go-to. It's like quality of life freedom, like being able to not have to work so hard to still just be on this treadmill, right? Um, to have freedom to, um, and, and experience joy on a daily basis, um, to have freedom, to not have to do things to survive, but to thrive, right? Um, I, I really, I don't know, man. I, I don't know what the moment was or when, like my blackness got mad, like activated. But I do, I believe probably more than I believe a lot of things in like the brilliance and power of Black people, um, and that we just deserve, we just deserve to have a life of ease. Um, and to have that anything that I can do it is to try to get us whether, whether it's like personal development work and helping folks understand like themselves and their, their gifts and how to like chase those passions or the actual like tangible resources and knowledge and education. Like, I really want to empower us. I want us to be empowered, um, in a way that that can be a reality in our lifetimes, You know? And I, I think we we're owed that we, we deserve that…when you're in these seats of breaking ceilings and creating pathways, it sometimes just feels like you can't stop. And I know that's true for all the way down the spectrum of our experiences. It's just, there's this, there's this understanding that we just can't stop. We can't rest, we can't take a break. We can't, uh, show weakness. We can't, uh, miss a step. We can't. And it's just, we can't, It's so restrictive. That's, that's what it is. So restrictive, the experience. And I want for all of us to be in a space where that is not the case, where it's the complete opposite, where we feel free to dream and move freely through this world and go after all of the things that we want and fail and fail again, and keep failing, because that's a part of it. Right? And we're not even told that piece of it. That's a big part of our curriculum too, is like we are told so often that failure is the end of the road for us. And it's not, you know, it, it's not. And so I want us to have the freedom to fail.

Michelle expressed her radical imagination for how it looks and feels for us to be free, an imaginative experience that is not only Afrofuturistic but liberating for the wholeness of our being. Although I have abstained from defining Black liberation for Black women up until now, it is emblematic of the Afrofuturist vision that I had imagined it would be. It is important to acknowledge that when Black women are leading, they are doing so with these working definitions in mind, consciously and subconsciously. This is emblematic of radical Black feminisms as well, which also emphasizes the importance of creativity and imagination in the struggle for liberation. This passage speaks to the importance of quality of life and the freedom to experience joy and thrive, the importance of empowering Black people and providing them with the resources and knowledge necessary to succeed, and speaks to the restrictive nature of societal expectations placed on Black people and the need for greater freedom to dream, fail, and try again; all of which aligns with Black feminist principles of emphasizing the value of individual experiences and the need for social justice movements to address the specific needs of our people, intersectionality, and challenging oppressive societal norms and redefining what success looks like in a society that often prioritizes certain identities and experiences over others (Crenshaw, 2017; Davis, 2016; Gay, 2017; Cooper, 2018; Rankine, 2014).

I also asked interviewees about the theoretical frameworks and philosophies that organized their understandings of liberation. The majority of Black women (68 percent), most of whom were part of the BRC, said ‘yes’ but many were unsure, uplifting the value of the experiential as a framework of its own for others to model their practices after. Many of us are well read, however, the common theme was the work being grounded in our experiential practices. Black women indicated that they may be using frameworks that they aren’t aware of but what they know to be true is based on their lived experiences, what they see in their community, the rate at which progress is moving, and where the gaps are. These are the things

that contributed most to the building of a grounded framework in community. This was best demonstrated through a conversation I had with one Founder & Executive Director in particular.

Glenance: Is your work, or the work of [the organization], rooted in any theoretical frameworks or philosophies pertaining to Black liberation?

Ari: I don't think so. Um, at least none that I'm aware of. Um, it's all experiential. Like it's, it's all, this is what I see, this is what I've experienced. This is, nope, <laugh>, Wow. Nope, nope. But I will say that that is one thing that, um, as we're growing and as we now have, you know, six years under our belt of programs, and, um, that is one area that like we, we hadn't had capacity before, um, but are very interested in how we tie this to research, both like historical, um, but then also how do we be a research study for what this actually looks like moving forward for Black liberation. And so, I think moving forward into the next couple years, we'll start to find partners and folks that can help us, um, develop that. Um, and again, sort of grounded in some of those practices, um, because I, that has not been a thing that we've done to this.

Independent of how well read on frameworks and philosophies of Black liberation that Black women were or were not, they used their lived experiences and values as the north star to guide their practice. Many of these Black women were doing exactly as we are at the BRC, in terms of navigating through a cycle of continuous improvement. We're all trying a lot of things and figuring out what's working and what isn't through trial and error while simultaneously trying to be socially responsible but also trying to focus on our leadership. I don't think any of us came to the table being like, yea, I just knocked that leadership thing right out the park. Honestly, we're all questioning just how great of a job we're actually doing, especially when we're being critiqued by our own. However, the thing that motivates us is knowing that there's an end goal. In the words of abolitionist feminist scholar Mariame Kaba (2021), "We do this 'til we free us". If not us, then who? So, we take the lumps as we go along the process as we remain grounded and

focused on the needs of our community as a key driving factor in our collective work toward Black liberation. Throughout this process, I observed that the Black women interviewed started with a need and then came to an understanding or self-definition of a Black liberation framework rather than starting with a framework of Black liberation according to a designated definition provided to them to figure out how that would fit to a community need. This genesis is helpful in thinking about the ways in which Black women articulate self-determination as it pertains to their strengthening and sustainability of their communities. This is in alignment with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's (2013) work *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black* Study which discusses the history of Black radical thought and the experiences of Black people navigating white supremacy in order to imagine new possibilities for resistance and liberation. Harney and Moten explore the idea of "fugitivity," which involves strategies for subverting and escaping from dominant power structures. This is especially useful in this study where alternative educational practices in community are being leveraged to advance equitable outcomes in resistance to current structures of power and institutional racism. Their work critiques these structures in the academy and beyond, exploring new possibilities for resistance and liberation. We, as Black women, are the "undercommons" as we're collectively working to stabilize a network of connections and alliances outside of the dominant institutional structures in service of Black liberation.

However, there are tensions that also function within a larger sociopolitical structural context that organizations are contending with, whether it's funding or intra-community struggles. Black women in this study were navigating and attempting to remedy emergent concerns while in service of Black liberation as defined by them, on their own terms. Many of these priorities, such as funding, operate in the context of a neoliberal policy regime that creates competitive market for resources and funding so engaging in that particular pool of competitive resource and securing procurement opportunities, in some ways, force organizations to amplify the very thing that limits organizations. This is a key a tension because while folks are doing the

work in service of Black liberation, this also limits the capacity for which people can do the work. There were a number of ways that Black women are navigating these tensions. The most common strategy is probably the unhealthiest, and that is just becoming a one or two woman show. I observed Black women were taking on multiple roles because they were less likely to sacrifice programming. Instead, they sacrificed themselves first. They became the Executive Director, bookkeeper, social media guru, accountant, and lawyer; taking on the brunt of the labor so they can pay people in specialized roles to carry out the work. Another way that people are navigating through this tension is through collective partnerships. If there are people or other organizations in the community that are doing similar work of an aligned scope, people are likely to collectively pursue a source of funding. Independent of funding, Black women are constantly learning and thus likely to go out and get professional development resources to support their practice. Those are the three major ways in which Black women are navigating some of those tensions both related to and independent of funding.

This is also evidence of the argument that I made with regard to healing justice frameworks in Chapter Two: These women leading Black organizations worked to address issues through various culturally-responsive practices to healing our communities (Bosley et al., 2022). Such has been the case for the Black Researchers Collective as well, specifically in terms of the culturally-responsive community education programming developed and executed as a form of healing and liberation.

After having a couple of unpleasant experiences with large institutions who wanted to work with us but not fully honor our values, experiences, and contributions, we decided to collectively develop a set of guiding principles (displayed in Figure 2) that would help us in our decision-making pertaining to collaboration and partnerships. Since developing that set of principles, we have yet to find ourselves in another situation in which we are negotiating our value-based priorities and exposing our communities to the risk of additional unnecessary harm.

Figure 2. BRC's Guiding Principles for Collaboration and Partnership

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP

- Our North Star
    - We believe in Black liberation
        - Partners should be committed to the improvement of Black lives and Black communities.
        - The voice of community is first and foremost. We will not come to the table with preconceived notions and narratives.
    - We believe in collaborative partnerships
        - Collaborative partnerships are those that value and take our direct contributions into consideration as key decision makers, regardless of the type of partnership (i.e., prime and subcontractor relationships).
    - We believe in the co-ownership and/or sharing of data
        - Co-ownership and/or sharing of data means open access to project data, including the right to use and publish independently of partners. We prioritize community ability to access data concerning and/or impacting them.
    - We believe in joint recognition
        - Black Researchers Collective should be recognized in authorship for any publications that will be disseminated publicly.
    - We love what we do but we don't work for free
        - We value the sharing and allocation of monetary resources appropriately to adequately execute key tasks with fidelity; this includes pre-project work such as the development of a detailed scope of work prior to contractual agreements
    - All skinfolk ain't kinfolk and every project ain't for us
        - Partners and projects must share a deep alignment of values and decolonizing vision for carrying out the work.

Just as clear as they were in their definitions of Black liberation, Black women were equally clear on what it meant to do Black liberation work. This meaning making for women external to the collective illuminated a set of core beliefs which included the following, in no particular order. The best examples of these core beliefs illuminated from my interviews with BLO leaders are included under each below.

1) The idea of needing to fit into a certain box or definition is elitist and classist and that everyone's intellect and experiences have value in the pursuit of Black liberation.

Terry: It's always, always, there seems to be a call for us to get in a box. For us to determine that there are certain people who are the thinkers…And that is such an elitist view. It is such a classist view of this as though there's no value to anyone else's intellect because you have been afforded certain luxuries. That allowed you to concentrate on a particular thing at a particular time. Know that other people may not have been afforded, but there are also other people who top themselves in so many things. I have run into some really amazing people. For all these extremely gifted folk who are self-taught through their whole process, you know, and who go ahead and do research on their own and who go ahead and think through and look at certain things on their own, it's an amazing thing.

This passage critiques the elitist and classist view that only certain people are qualified to be thinkers and have valuable intellect. It indicates that this view ignores the intellectual abilities of those who have not had the same opportunities, including those who are self-taught and have had to do their own research. It advocates for recognizing and valuing the intellectual capabilities of all people, regardless of their background or educational opportunities. This suggests that true liberation work should prioritize inclusivity and recognize the value of diverse perspectives and experiences.

2) The importance of making the work irresistible, telling stories that involve others and create passion for what is possible.

Lena: For me, it's always knowing that more is possible, um, and that the best parts of ourself can be reflected back to us in a space…And I think, um, just to make this work irresistible. Yeah. Like, I think that that feels like, particularly my work as a storyteller, I wanna tell stories that people feel implicated by. Yeah. And they're like, oh, I want a little bit more of that. And so you, you can't unsee it anymore. You, you have to move forward.

And so I think, um, less apathy and, and just more, um, passion for, for what, what is possible.

This passage highlights the importance of creating a space where people can see the best parts of themselves reflected back at them and be inspired to take action towards a more liberated future. This leader suggests that as a storyteller, their goal is to create stories that make people feel implicated and want to be a part of the movement for change. She aims to create work that is irresistible and motivates people to move forward and pursue what is possible, rather than succumbing to apathy. This suggests that a core belief of doing liberation work is to create spaces that inspire and empower people to take action towards a more equitable environment.

3) The acknowledgement that Black liberation work is constantly evolving and influenced by various experiences and people, and that it cannot be defined or articulated in a set way.

Glenance: What does it mean to do black liberation work? If you were to articulate that, you know?

Corinne: Well, I'm, I'm not sure that the questions that you ask work for me.

Glenance: Yeah. No. And I, I get that…I totally get that. How, how, how would I…

Corinne: It's constantly farming in you. It's not like a set of stuff. And you get in that and you stay in it. You're constantly being influenced if you really are a truth seeker. If you are a real seeker of truth and knowledge, you're constantly being influenced by new information, new exploration, people that you meet in circumstances and conditions. You know, as a sociologist, I believe that what you're living, what you experiencing is also going to influence your thinking, your concentration, the things that you do. You know, and if you can't apply them, of what value are they?

The passage highlights the importance of constantly seeking new knowledge and being open to new experiences as part of the process of doing liberation work. To be a seeker of truth, one

must be constantly influenced by new information, exploration, and the people they meet. As a sociologist, Corinne believes that personal experiences can influence one's thinking and actions, and that knowledge is only valuable if it can be applied to create positive change. This suggests that a core belief of doing liberation work is a commitment to continuous learning and personal growth, being open to new experiences and perspectives, and using this knowledge to inform and guide one's actions towards more equitable outcomes.

4) An understanding that Black liberation is an end goal that every society should strive for, but it may take time to achieve.

Veronica: Um, the main thing I see for Black liberation is a, um, is a, or conditions of, of peaceful existence, um, in which we're able to, um, really decide what we wanna do with our resources. Um, what we want to do with our, um, we wanna do with our families, how we want to live, how we want to design our surroundings, um, how we want to decide what wellness is. Um, I see peaceful existence for children. I see safety for children. I see, um, people having, um, having true, uh, confidence in their place in the world, that public space belongs to them. Um, and when I say peaceful existence, um, you know, that's a, I think that's an end goal, right? Um, but, you know, um, I think that I think probably every society wants to get there. Yeah. And it's, it's, it's gonna take some time. Yeah. Um, but, you know, I think that when I, I think that's something that we deserve also. Um, we deserve to have, we deserve to be in a situation where people have, um, have a feeling of, of safety.

This passage articulates a vision of Black liberation that centers the ability to live peacefully and make choices about one's resources, family, surroundings, and wellbeing. Veronica highlights the importance of safety for children and the need for Black people to have confidence in their place in the world, including the public space, and acknowledges that achieving a peaceful

existence is an end goal that every society desires but it will take time to achieve. This suggests that a core belief of doing liberation work is the belief in the inherent dignity and worth of all people, especially Black people, and the commitment to creating conditions that allow them to live their lives with safety, autonomy, and agency.

5) And last but certainly not least, Black liberation starts with self-love, pride, and education on one's history and understanding the struggles of our ancestors.

Basia: Black liberation work is so, it's so many parts of it. I probably could <laugh> never fully say what it is, but I think it starts, Black liberation starts with a point of view, <laugh>. And so, it's not like everybody has to be exactly on that same page because I think that that's really hard and probably impractical, but I think that it, Black liberation starts with self and it comes from love of self, it comes from pride of self, but it also comes from education. It comes from knowing your history, embracing your history, and understanding the struggle of our ancestors, how we got here and all of the brilliance, the work, the toil that took us to this point. And also to do an analysis of where those barriers are today. Cause they're fluid and some are implicit, explicit, this systemic racism. It's like the air we breathe, you know. Can't see it so often, but it's there.

This passage highlights the complexity of Black liberation work and indicates that it starts with a particular point of view that centers self-love and pride, as well as education about Black history and the struggle of our ancestors. Basia emphasizes the need to understand the barriers that exist today, whether they are explicit, implicit, or systemic, and do a critical analysis of them accordingly. This suggests that a core belief of doing liberation work is the recognition that systemic barriers to Black liberation exist and therefore it is important to engage in a process of education and critical analysis to identify and overcome them. For her, the importance of self-love and pride are foundational elements of Black liberation work.

Overall, what it meant to do Black liberation work was creating spaces where these needs were met in abundance and where people could express themselves fully and authentically. Black women within the Collective shared that Black liberation is articulated within the context of the organization through the empowerment of people to take control of their lives and resist brainwashing through knowledge sharing and providing resources and tools; understanding the specific issues facing the community and providing support to help community members create their own solutions; serving as a conduit for conversation and amplifying the voices of the community by providing them with research, resources, and information; tailoring the expression of Black liberation to each specific project and community; and empowering community members to take ownership of their own projects to be a bridge for access.

Leadership Attributes and Organizational Characteristics

As clear as Black women were on their definitions of Black liberation and how they're working toward it, when I asked them what kind of leader they would describe themselves to be, the first statement that was shared across the board was "I don't know" or "I'm not sure." These hesitations were followed by a pause as their eyes shifted to the beat of their internal reflection before they resumed with external processing. A similar pattern, with thoughtful pauses and a level of apprehensiveness, emerged when they were asked to share the essential characteristics and attributes that they personally bring to the table. I later learned, during my wellness checks with every participant after the interview was over and the recording was stopped, that most of them had never even been asked those questions before and so many of them had never taken the time to reflect on themselves as an asset to the space in which they are heavily contributing. This was in alignment with what we experienced with our workshop participants during their reflection exercise on personal and professional assets as well. This is not to say that Black women were not self-reflective, because their practices demonstrate that they are. However, it does demonstrate how little we think of our value add to a space. We are

more concerned with the impact of the things that we do, and how we can be most effective and accountable to the people and initiatives that we love. Surprisingly, many of them thanked me for asking the questions. It allowed them to bring their skills and assets to front of mind, providing an opportunity for gratitude, self-appreciation, and grace. Not surprisingly, as Black women, we're constantly putting the needs of others before our own. In their article "Race and gender matter", Cheryl Woods-Giscombé and Marci Lobel (2008) confirms this through their discussion of how Black women experience unique stressors related to their intersecting identities as both Black and female, and how they use coping strategies that prioritize the needs of others over their own. As Black women, we also face pressure to appear strong and resilient, which can make it difficult for us to prioritize our own emotional needs and seek help for mental health issues, as best discussed in Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2007) article "You have to show strength". Many of us were socialized be a superwoman, taking on herculean efforts under what Woods-Giscombé (2018) the "Superwoman schema," a cultural belief that Black women should be strong and self-sacrificing, which can contribute to us prioritizing the needs of others over our own.

When Black women did start their external processing, many of them shared several leadership attributes in a matter of seconds, many of which was directly tied to who they are as a Black woman in the world. For example, the common leadership attributes among women in BLOs (*n*=15) were community-centered leadership, team-centered leadership, servant leadership, responsive and hands-on leadership, and authentic and empathetic leadership. In fact, the leadership style of many of the Black women interviewed fell into multiple thematic categories, as demonstrated through the narrative of the BLO leader Destiny below.

Destiny: Um, I would definitely describe myself as a servant leader, um, for sure. So, um, even though [the organization] has gotten a lot of recognition, um, you know, both in Chicago and nationally, I still am like, I got work to do <laugh>, you know, we got work to do. So, um, I'm definitely someone who's more about like

> centering the needs of our community, you know? Um, and how that informs our decision making or, or what we do and what we focus on. Um, and then as my team, I also like encourage collaboration as well. Now there's some things, what I say goes <laugh>, but other things, you know, I try to, um, I try to support my team members and feeling like you don't just work here, like you're a part of our organization. Like you're important, you know, to what we do. And so, I really, as a leader, I try to encourage not just collaboration, but also like leadership development as well.

Women at BLOs saw themselves as leaders who prioritized community voices and tries to find a balance between different perspectives, focuses on community first, and leads with the goal of helping the community live their best lives. They saw themselves as leaders who prioritize the needs of their team and provides them with the tools and supports needed to succeed, is supportive and encourages ownership and responsibility for contributions, and aims to create a space where people can bring their whole selves. Moreover, they perceived their leadership to prioritize the needs and contributions of those who work with and for them, is in tune with the needs of communities and wants to ensure that their actions are contributing directly to those needs while encouraging collaboration and leadership development within their team. Although participants shared attributes that fell across several buckets, the majority of their self-described leader attributes were aligned with being a responsive and hands-on leader: one who is always looking to understand what is happening in the world and making sure their actions and decisions are meeting a need and filling a gap, and is hands-on in their work and believes that practice informs theory and is a hands-on community service leader. For those who indicated that their leadership was authentic and empathetic, the adjectives that they used to describe themselves included relatable, empathetic, understanding, approachable, vulnerable, and authentic; along with acknowledging their own limitations and growth, and leading with intuition, empathy, and sensitivity. For the women of BRC, the themes of their leadership attributes can

be distinctly qualified as collaborative and valuing the perspectives of others, strategic thinking and inclusivity, empowering and capacity builder, flexibility and openness to feedback, and focusing on addressing historical injustices and inequalities, specifically related to Black people in professional settings.

The experiences of being a Black woman very much influenced the kind of leader that Black women became. For the women of the Collective, this influence came from them having to acknowledge the impact of their Black womanhood on leadership and navigating related stereotypes accordingly. Having to be aware of and prepared to address injustice and discrimination, having to be mindful of communication to avoid stereotypes of being perceived as the "angry Black woman", garnering the willingness to call out colleagues and peers on race-related issues, and using their own unique perspective as a Black woman to make decisions and support the community were all factors in influencing the kind of leader that they became. One Collective founding member spoke of this entanglement with regard to their experiences of Black womanhood and their self-described leadership qualities by comically stating, “Oh, for one, that shit don’t off.” Scholars such as Julianne Malveaux (2010) and Linda Putnam (2003) have written about the kinds of experiences that shape leadership as well, from the ways that Black people have overcome challenges to build successful businesses and communities to the ways that gender and race intersect to shape professional identity and how the experiences of women in the workplace influence their relationships with one another.

For women at BLOs, their identity as Black women played an equally significant role in shaping their skills and abilities. They even developed specific skills and strengths as a result of their experiences as a Black woman in the world. The influential factors for this group included a level of consciousness of the spaces they occupy and thoughts about inclusivity, it hinged on the unique needs of Black women in the workplace, was related to them being lifelong learners who are always eager to grow as leaders, and being affirmed in their identity from their childhood which has allowed them to see themselves as a whole person and demand the same

respect and resources as everyone else. Similar to the experiences of Black women in the Collective, one BLO leader Fatima discussed this relationship as follows.

Fatima: Well, um, I think it's very related. <laugh>. Uh, I'm, I'm not sure how. Yeah, I, I, I don't know how to separate how I behave, like behave as a leader from my just experience as a person. Yeah. And, um, I think, I suppose there's also the aspect of why being leadership, why I choose to do that. Um, the reason why I'm in leadership right now is because of the need I think exists and the gaps that exist and, and what, and, and being able to address those, to fill those. Um, so, um, and, and because of my, you know, position as a black woman, I'm able to, to see what that is. I'm able to look at this problem and, you know, come up with something. Yeah. <laugh>, you know, um, I think that, um, I know that Black women are, are and have been constantly working to solve problems.

"If you could hang a visual board on your wall with all your most essential organization characteristics or attributes, what would be included? Similarly, if you could hang a visual board on your wall with the most essential personal characteristics or attributes that you personally bring to the organization, what would be included?," were the questions I asked Black women to understand the relationship between them and their organization values. Table 8 displays the most essential organization characteristics and personal attributes for Black women within and external to the BRC. Notice that the organization characteristics that Black women mentioned first for within and external to the collective, respectively, are a direct reflection of their personal attributes. During the interviews, as Black women started listing their personal attributes, they almost immediately noticed the connections between the two, indicating just how closely aligned the personal values of Black women are with the interests and skills demonstrated in their organization's mission, core work, and vision. In many cases, they found themselves repeating the same words or phrases. One BLO leader Joy spoke to these connections by saying, "Um,

yeah, I definitely hear some connections. Um, I think my personal values are part of the organizational, values. Um, yeah, I would say like, yeah, my personal values are definitely a part of the organizational values.” Given that the majority of these women worked with and within organizations founded by them, these findings suggest that the qualities of Black women become the primary culture and values of the organization. In other words, who Black women are in the world becomes an integral component of the organization culture. The organizational fabric and structure are the collective spirit and heart of Black women, which speaks directly to a Black feminist consciousness. In addition, for the first time, we can observe some real distinctions between the characteristics of the Black Researchers Collective and other BLOs who are leading similarly. For example, in Table 8, we can observe that the Collective organization characteristics and personal attributes include a focus on research and policy, qualities that did not explicitly emerge in the most essential characteristics mentioned by BLO leaders. We have found our lane, and it is already meeting a long-awaited need.

Table 8. Most Essential Characteristics and Attributes

BLO Org Characteristics (*n*=11)	**Collective Org Characteristics (*n*=8)**	**BLO Personal Attributes (*n*=11)**	**Collective Personal Attributes (*n*=8)**
Building power and community	Community-driven approach	Community-centered approach	Networking and funding relations
Empowerment and liberation	Leadership and collaboration	Creativity and innovation	Policy analysis and advocacy
History and legacy	Research-based approach	Authenticity and integrity	Organizational growth strategy
Innovation and change	Funding and partnerships	Empathy and collaboration	Visionary and executor
Authenticity and values	Inclusivity and open communication	History and spatial justice	Flexible and diplomatic approach

Reflecting on how Black women’s experiences shaped how they show up as a leader in their organizations, we asked them to speak to some of the cultural assets (art, music, storytelling,

history, language) that they leverage as Black women in their decision-making (with regard to organizational priorities and otherwise). The passage below demonstrates an example of how Black women leverage cultural assets in their decision-making.

Cultural Assets and Decision Making

Glenance: Can you speak to some of the cultural assets that you leverage as a Black woman in your decision making? And those cultural assets can be whatever you deem to be a cultural asset. I usually think of art, music, storytelling, history, language, all those things, but it could be whatever you deem.

Kendra: I think as researchers, we're always seen as really rigid and cold [so] I like to have, I call 'em conversations instead of a focus group or an interview <laugh>. So, I just think the warmness of that, just bringing warmth into the research. I don't think that when I was asking these individuals why they weren't attending, why they didn't attend, they didn't feel like, oh she's asking me questions to do research. We were having a conversation and it was free flowing, and they were giving some feedback, and I was asking questions about what they had to say. So, I think that definitely is a cultural aspect of it. And then the language. I feel like another thing that's going on right now is in terms of communication that they're emphasizing…is being succinct and using less words and being straight and direct to the point because nobody has time to read these long reports or even long memos, executive summaries…I feel like I've always been pretty good at that, or the master of that. Cause I've always been like, I don't got time to read all this stuff there. And so I sat in a training [at work] talking about the language, taking it in more. Cause we all have these advanced degrees, but even just when you're talking about doing education research, a parent or a student doesn't have

time for a teacher to read all this stuff and understand what you're really trying to get at. So just being succinct and using familiar language with…

Glenance: Individuals. Yeah, that's real. Yeah, that's real…Can you provide an example of maybe another time in which you leveraged some of those cultural assets in a decision-making process maybe inside or outside of the organization? Just curious.

Kendra: So, I'm not gonna name the client, but I was working on a project where I was working with, we were working with higher ed institutions, and I was working with HBCUs on gathering this data. So we had done, I mean this was a five-year project. And so our client wasn't the institutions, the client was the funder. But honestly, when you're asking all these questions and engaging with these institutions, these HBCUs, for however many years, they're like, we wanna know what you're writing. We wanna learn more. And so I advocated for them because honestly [my job] was not gonna show them anything that they were writing. Cause they were like, this is for the funder.

Glenance: Yeah.

Kendra: …I'm like, you can't have all these conversations and not let people know what you're writing about them…And what you're saying about them. And so that was something I advocated for. I honestly don't think the other, the PWIs, whereas maybe that never came up until I said something like they're asking for this. And I kind of agree, this is kind of odd. I wouldn't want to be involved in something for a long time. It's not just a one-time thing. But I'm continuously asking you, collecting information from you, but I'm not letting you know what I'm writing or what I'm saying about you.

Glenance: Yeah, yeah. No, that's no ok. Thank you for that. That's a perfect <laugh> example. Cause I'm pretty sure that moving forward they're probably thinking

about that a little differently.

Kendra: You can't just collect all this information from communities and say, okay, thank you. And bounce.

This conversation with Kendra, one of the Collective's founding board members is emblematic of how Black women at the Black Researchers Collective discussed leveraging cultural assets in their decision making. Not everyone could pinpoint something specific (as demonstrated in the passage below), but those who did name specific cultural assets leveraged them well by working to build connections and partnerships to support the organization's growth and mission; shaping the organization's priorities; emphasizing collaboration and inclusivity while being clear and confident in their vision and decisions; recognizing and addressing issues and inequalities within the organization, promoting acceptance and acknowledgement of cultural differences; and valuing diverse perspectives, actively inviting different voices to contribute to decision-making, as indicated in the opening passage above.

Glenance: Can you give an example of a time that you've used some of those creative cultural assets that you mentioned in your decision making for the Black Researchers Collective?

Mae: I mean, I don't know. I just know that that's what happens. I know when it looks right. I just know when it feels right and it feels right when it trips off the tongue. It feels right when it looks right. It feels like when I can get next to it. I don't know that I necessarily said I'm gonna use this one skill to do this thing. But I think that that's how I operate. I don't have the clinical words to say what it is, but it is. That's what it is.

In addition to interviewing Black women about leadership and liberation, I examined the decision-making practices of the Collective as a unit through the observations of internal board meetings. The findings that emerged from those observations indicate that, in addition to Black women leveraging their cultural experiences of personhood in their work as individuals, they

aligned their collective experiences to make decisions that are collaborative, consensus-based, and consistent of discussion, feedback, and delegation. Some of the primary themes of discussion for decision making over the year of observation included event planning and community engagement, organization structure and decision making, budget and financial considerations, research processes and data analysis, and collaboration and partnerships which yielded the set of the guiding principles referenced earlier in this chapter; a prime example of how we collectively used our leadership attributes and cultural assets as Black women in our decision-making to make the organization stronger.

Measuring Wins

Black Woman
I will celebrate you when the drums of war go silent
When your back is bare and burden free
I will crown your soft — a treasure;
I found value in your breath before they stitched your
worth to your accolades
I pray rest is a throne you never neglect,
That man ain't yours to raise,
This **world** ain't yours to save
You are ours to love.
— Jasmine Sims, *Done Being Strong: A Collection of Poems*

This labor of love that we're pouring into our people, onto our streets, ain't easy but it sure is rewarding. People go their whole life never appreciating the present because they're always chasing the next thing, in search of the big win. There's nothing wrong with having big goals and aiming for the stars. It's just equally important to acknowledge and celebrate the small wins along way, as the cumulative effect of those wins have the potential to ripple and have a resounding impact beyond what you might have dreamed. With that in mind, I found myself in a deep space of gratitude at the end of every interview with the Black women who graciously devoted their time. Gratitude not just for the conversation but in awe of the fact that they saw their work, and themselves in the work, in the same ways that we see ours.

When I asked participants how they determined a win, every last one of their contributions included something small, measurable, micro-level, and achievable. For example, helping and enabling people to help others, investing in children, securing grants and opportunities, daily successes, having a clear and mutual understanding of the overall goal, building partnerships and relationships, providing resources for growth and development; all things that can be accomplished along the way. As a result of how Black women have determined their wins, the wins that Black women were most proud of across organizations pertained to (1) community engagement and outreach, (2) accomplishments and growth, (3) internal collaboration and voice, (4) progress towards goals, and (5) metrics and outcomes. The passages below demonstrate a couple of examples of how wins for organizations were determined both internal and external to the Black Researchers Collective.

> "We set some goals, we have some outcomes and we're measuring it and we're making progress on the measurement of that and we're making project progress on the outputs of that as well. And so I think that that's how I determine what is a win, big or small, if the needle is moving closer toward the achievement of the things that we said that we wanted and needed to be doing." – Glenance, Collective Co-Founder

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> "I think a small win is when folks come back and say, I, you know, when we had this conversation at [the BLO] it made me think this new thought and it changed the way that they, you know, experienced their blackness or, or made decisions in their life. Or, um, folks who, uh, are able to talk to their networks with different language to be, even if it's not, you know, I got, you know, 10 people vote, like maybe you just were able to have a conversation about the government or about whatever we were talking about. Um, we, and we helped, you know, give you tools and, um, support you in understanding your own perspectives on it. And you were able to share that. I think, you know, we look, we often look for these big policy wins, but those are actually few and far between. It's the

personal transformation wins along the way that create the conditions for the big policy shifts." – Naima, BLO Leader

The spaces that Black women led were active sites of resistance. They were organizations that reflected the organization goals that many institutions have for themselves but are struggling to move the needle because they still just don't get it. These wins are milestones along our progress. It is my hope that we can learn from one another as we collectively continue to work toward our shared vision for Black liberation.

Challenges and Tensions

If I'm completely honest, I have struggled in my leadership, particularly in environments that are Black serving because I've always felt that the stakes were much higher. I've always felt that so much was on the line and the consequences of my failure were so much greater when my people are counting on me for forward progress. As fulfilling and rewarding as this work is, I find that part of it to be really hard because I don't want to let my people down. We can't afford to continue to be left down. Sometimes it feels like I can't mess up, or be human, thrusting me into a seemingly isolated and unhealthy world of the superwoman complex (Woods-Giscombé, 2018), where none of us really want to be. We just want to do good work. We just want to liberate ourselves and help our people get free. I constantly feel that my leadership is being tried and stretched in both great and not so great ways, and often *from* my own people. During this process, the stories of other Black women confirmed that I am not alone.

The biggest challenges or pitfalls that Black women within the Black Researchers Collective mentioned experiencing (*N*=8) pertained to (1) building relationships and partnerships, (2) time management and communication, (3) the quality of work and resources, and (4) gatekeeping and intra-community issues. The following passage below speaks to both building relationships and partnerships and gatekeeping and intra-community issues.

Glenance: …Another pitfall that we're starting to see come up, which I'm

curious, I'm interested in just trying to stay open is I think that there's folks who just don't really understand what we're doing. I think cause people are connected to their communities and spaces, the way in which they're connected to it, right? People want it to be one way. You know what I mean? Yeah. I want what you doing to fit into this little bubble right here and if it don't fit into this bubble, what you doing? You know what I mean? And that's not, that's the way in which we're working. And so I think that I'm seeing those little things come up and I'm just trying to navigate through it as they arise. And it has to do with gatekeeping, protection, and wanting people to protect what they have and what they're building. And that's okay. But part of it is we're not here to extract from anything or anybody. We got some tools, and we're trying to pay people to get these tools in your hands. If it works, it works. If it doesn't, it doesn't. Keep it moving!

This anecdote illuminates our encounters with some people who don't understand or may not agree with the work we're doing, which can create tension and challenges in building relationships and partnerships with different communities. Gatekeepers are common, and necessary, in our communities but sometimes it feels like the gatekeeping is mode of policing one another as opposed to a mechanism of leveraging our collective assets to stabilize and sustain by keeping out the entities that have zero interest in the preservation of Black life. In the old adage of our people, all skinfolk ain't kinfolk. One staff member shared her biggest challenges; they pertained to time management and communication.

Glenance: What do you feel have been some of the challenges or biggest pitfalls that you've experienced so far?

Quinta: I think it's just time and expectations. Because sometimes I think because we are flexible and we're not really managing hours, I just show up to things. But

some days I have other projects to work around so I'm not working on this work. And sometimes I think that there's a disconnect [between] what is expected of me and what I'm actually contracted to do. If that makes sense.

Admittedly, I often felt that this particular staff member took my flexibility and kindness for granted, especially given that she was never a contract employee and was 'on the clock' for multiple jobs simultaneously despite being a part-time W-2 employee with a flexible but designated schedule for the BRC. Because we're working in a gig economy, we are well aware of the other commitments that people have so we try to stay nimble. However, I often wonder whether the casual nature of how some people choose to show up in the work is as a result of them working for and with another Black woman. I often wonder whether people would admit to just showing up to things, in a predominantly white environment, or in a predominantly Black environment with a white leader, or even in a Black environment with a Black man leading. As Black people, we say we want and need Black leadership but often undermine and don't respect it when we experience it, especially from a Black woman. The third and final theme of challenges faced by the Black women of the Collective pertained to the quality of work and resources. One founding Board member had the following to say below.

Glenance: What have been some of the challenges and pitfalls?

Shanelle: We not gonna name names. <laugh> What you say, not all…

Glenance: Skinfolk ain't kinfolk.

Shanelle: Yes, exactly, that part. That can be a true statement. So I think that is a challenge that not everyone, just because they look like us in terms of other Black-led organizations or whatever the case may be, just because they're Black doesn't also mean that we're all on the same page, shooting for the same mission and walking in the same direction here. And what we're not anyone's token… I feel like in a way we, it's like we're fighting to prove something. But we really don't have shit to prove to anyone. Cause we know this, we got this, and

we know this…The quality of our work, is what it is...The women that we are as founders and the women that we've brought on to be part of this. The family and the team that is the BRC, we hold ourselves to impeccably high standards. Yeah, so much so it's almost, it's almost impossible to find people like us.

Glenance: <laugh> Remember, we're not finding people like us. We're finding people…look at…not that face, stop it. <laugh>. We're finding people with incredible skill sets that can align with ours, <laugh>.

Shanelle: All of that. But not biting off more than we can chew. And being realistic in terms of capacity. Cause it will get done, but maybe not on the timeline that we want it to happen or I want it to happen, but it will get done.

This founding Board member spoke to the challenges with regard to finding highly skilled people who operate and reflect a standard of excellence and demonstrate high quality contributions that extend the capacity of the Collective. Although the three passages above relate to three different themes, they speak to similar challenges of what it means to have a deeper and thoughtful engagement with our own people.

Black women external to the Collective expressed similar tensions (*n*=13). These tensions pertained to the themes of (1) organizational management and sustainability, (2) team building and support, and (3) outreach and engagement. One BLO leader Nylah had the following to say about organizational management and sustainability.

Glenance: …And the challenges and pitfalls that you've had? mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Nylah: Um, I think, um, one challenge is, um, how do I put this? Um, how to, um, ensure the sustainability of the organization while also remaining ourselves and staying true to the mission that we want and the vision you want, in the manner in which we plan to do our work. Right. Um, I think it's fine to shift strategy, right? How you do something where you get there, how you get there, but it's not okay to, to shift your foundational reasons, your foundational, uh, principles. Um, and so the how

has to remain tethered to those principles, right? So, so what I mean like fundraising, right? If we want, if we know we wanna hire more people do this, this many more things, we need this much money. And you're trying to raise that money, um, you know, doing that in such a way where we are still in control. Um, that's probably, that's, that's a challenge, I'll say.

Nylah was primarily concerned with how to best ensure the sustainability of the organization while staying true to its mission and principles, a challenge that we, within the Collective, often discuss as well. Other important considerations within this theme concerns the difficulty in obtaining institutional knowledge and understanding how to run an organization, recognizing that the support they receive may only be temporary and figuring out how to make their work sustainable in the long-term, and navigated through challenges that present themselves when the organization grows too quickly.

The second theme mentioned pertained to team building and support. Similar to the narratives of the Collective, one BLO had the following to say about their hiring challenges.

Glenance: Um, what have been some of the biggest challenges or pitfalls that you feel like you've had along the way?

Irene: Yeah. Um, challenges, fundraising. Um, like I said, we struggled for a very long time with fundraising. Now it seems to be different, but I also am very um hmm. We'll see. Right? Like, we're getting a lot of money right now, but like, when is the appetite over?...And so, when this moment is over, uh, that will remain, you know, a challenge, how do we continue to find sustainable support for the organization. Um, the other challenge, truth be told has been hiring. Um, you know, we, for a long time we didn't have the money to hire anyone. Now we've got money to hire folks and we can't because it's such a niche. It's niche work that we're doing. You kind of gotta understand a lot about entrepreneurship. You gotta understand Black lived experience. And so we are, and we want the

organization to be as Black as it can, you know? Yeah. And so finding those unicorns, um, in our communities that can come in and get it and, and have had the experience, um, we're finding it's not necessarily maybe Chicago. We're starting to expand our search nationally because I know there are other Black folks doing this work across the country. How do we start to get them into this work? Um, and so, fundraising and hiring have been, um, two really big challenges. And then I, I think the third sometimes is adoption from the community. Um, sometimes they don't, they don't understand it, they don't get it, and they don't see the value.

For this leader, hiring was a challenge because their organization specialized in a niche service area and it was difficult to find people with both the understanding, context expertise, and lived experience to carry out the work. The concerned with regard to fundraising, staffing, and community adoption all relate to concerns amplified by the women of the Collective as well. Other considerations under this theme included building and maintaining a team, especially during the great reset, having the bandwidth and support, specifically not being able to pay people and bring them on board so that they're not just working for free, the difficulty in sharing the labor and finding support and people to share the workload with, and suffering from burnout due to lack of support and help.

The final thematic challenge that emerged for Black women external to the Collective was pertaining to outreach and engagement. One BLO leader Connie spoke to the tensions regarding people choosing to step away from the work.

Glenance: …What have been some of the biggest challenges and pitfalls that you've had?

Connie: …I mean, honestly, like, and I don't necessarily know that this is failure, but when like, when people choose to no longer be actively committed to like, being in the liberatory practice space, sometimes it feels like a failure, right? Or like a, like, you know, I'm like, oh, like, obviously there was something about the lack of

> safety in the space or there was something about the lack of like, you know, um, support or whatever it might be. You know, I can't just, I can't put on um, reasons into all these things. But like, so when I've seen people remove themselves, um, sometimes it's for their best. Yeah. But also, sometimes I think because it's like they weren't properly supported. So that's probably been the hardest. Um, and that's definitely happened a few times in [previous Black serving organization].

The tensions that Connie mentioned are tensions that I feel and face when we go through staff transitions and growing pains as well. It's kind of hard not to feel like a failure but my team reminds me that it's not about me. My Co-Founder often says, "You can't take these things, personal. You have to accept it for what it is and move on." Nevertheless, it's always a struggle because I'm always thinking about whether there was more that I could have done. In this particular thematic area, Black women were facing a multitude of tensions in their outreach and engagement efforts. One major challenge was making their program relevant and applicable to their audience, particularly high school students, while also connecting with people during the pandemic and effectively messaging their values and mission. Additionally, fundraising was difficult, as not everyone understood the importance and value of their work, and previous failures in implementation highlighted the need for relatable and effective mentoring. Furthermore, some Black women experienced tensions regarding navigating the tension between their creative agenda and the needs of the community they are working with, and confronting cynicism about the history of their organization. Black women were patient with policy implementation and ongoing monitoring to ensure proper community benefit, and balanced collective work with supporting individual organizations. In addition, working with a large number of people in meetings posed a challenge in ensuring everyone is included and engaged. Despite these challenges, Black women continued to strive for success in their outreach and engagement efforts.

As demonstrated, Black women spoke to the challenges of funding. However, given the history of us being traditionally underfunded and therefore left with no other option but to do what we can with little resources, this was not a theme that overshadowed the others. It was merely an obvious consideration within the context of each of the emergent themes, but not one that Black women indicated significantly impeded progress.

Collective Wisdom

As Black women wrapped up their interviews, they each shared a parting word of wisdom for those who might one day be standing on our shoulders. Our collective advice was, when working towards a big vision, it's important to prioritize both your vision and your well-being. Be sure to pace yourself and prioritize self-care to avoid burnout or vulnerability. One BLO leader Cheri left us with the following wise parting words.

Cheri: My advice is really to have a big vision, but to, to pace yourself and to not expand, not to make yourself vulnerable by stretching too thin. Um, that took a long time for us to kind of really kind of bounce back in terms of just being overextended, especially having young children <laugh> mm-hmm…you know, that was a challenging time for us, but it also did teach us a lot of, um, invaluable experiences that I definitely don't think we could have gotten from any type of educational resource. Right. And so I think my advice to anyone who's in interested in any field is to really think about, have, have your big vision and try to map it out. And if you, uh, don't map it out in a way that is not going to overextend you, um, to where you may be personally burned out or your business, business may be vulnerable.

It's also crucial to have the right people and resources in place to support and advise you when challenges arise. Building strong relationships with those you work with and actively engaging

with the community can help enrich the mission and impact of your work. To further your progress, consider finding someone in a similar industry who has already gone through similar challenges, tap into a network that can help you find answers, and emphasize the importance of patience, resilience, and perseverance when facing obstacles. Additionally, building a supportive network of community members and like-minded organizations can aid in achieving your goals. Don't forget to emphasize your personal passion and creativity, even in the face of challenges such as funding and finding partners. Utilizing resources within the community and monetizing opportunities can also be helpful. Above all, build a strong sense of self-belief and grounding in your personal values, and keep the bigger picture of Black liberation in mind as you work towards a common goal. Taken together, much of this collective advice speaks to the heart and soul of how we can be our best selves in the work as Black women. The following BLO leader Aya speaks to this in her passage below.

Aya: The first thing that came to mind was Wisdom Council <laugh>. I would really advise people to, um, create their own wisdom counsel. You know, like have a group of like trusted comrades that can really help support you when you're going through particular challenges. When you might need a little pep talk when you like, maybe need to be connected to certain resources…no leader should do this work alone…every leader should ideally have, um, access to the support that can really, um, keep them accountable, but allow them to be like really, really generative in the work that they do. Um, and also I'm a big advocate of rest <laugh>…You know, just like don't, you know, like, do not over extend yourself. Yeah. You can only be a leader that shows up for the community in the ways that you show up for yourself. For real, for real.

I close with this passage because it also implicitly speaks to love, as with many others throughout this chapter. The wisdom is being provided a counsel of people who love you and are just as invested in the whole person of the woman as they are in the work. The call for rest

and balance, from both of the passages above, is an act of resistance and love. Tricia Hershey (2022), the founder of The Nap Ministry[12] speaks to this battle cry beautifully in her new manifesto *Rest is Resistance.* Hershey's work, and the work of the Black women in this study, concurrently focuses on individual well-being, collective liberation, racial equity, and social justice.

Summary

In this chapter, I explored how Black women leading Black-led organizations (BLOs) worked toward Black liberation and amplified the characteristics or attributes that exist across Black-led organizations (BLOs) through the lens of Black women within and external to the Black Researchers Collective. Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate how these Black-led organizations, led by Black women, are inherently spaces of resistance. Overall, many of the study participants were younger Black women serving in key leadership roles—the majority of whom (66 percent) where under the age of 45—in fairly new organizations, many of which they founded or contributed to founding. Black women within and external to the BRC had shared definitions Black liberation, what it meant to be a Black-led organization, and what means to do Black liberation work. Their collective vision for Black-led liberation was virtually the same. Moreover, their experiences of being a Black woman in the world heavily influenced the kind of leader that Black women became.

The qualities of Black women became the primary culture and values of the organizations that they led. In other words, who Black women were in the world became an integral component of the organization culture. I found this to be true in my personal experience at the last organization that I worked for. When I came on board, I started solidarity circles during youth and young adult programming and all staff meetings to hold a space for our humanity before jumping back into the business of the work. When I left the organization and was invited

[12] https://thenapministry.com/

back to the organization as a guest speaker, I participated in the continuation of what I had originally started years prior. In the study, I found that Black women were constantly leveraging their cultural attributes and assets in their decision-making practices, and collectively, they determined what they perceived to be organizational 'wins' with regard to making progress toward Black liberation in a similar fashion.

I've argued throughout this chapter that Black women are leading as a labor of love and offered a definition of Black liberation rooted in their lived experiences and perspectives. This singular definition is as follows: Black liberation refers to the removal of systemic barriers that prevent Black people from achieving their goals and aspirations, and involves honoring their legacy, controlling their resources and community, achieving self-expression and education, addressing historical harm and reparations, and promoting intersectionality and community unity. Despite Black women leading and self-defining their work in these meaningful ways, they faced a number of challenges with regard to intra-community struggles that directly impacted their work and reflections of their leadership practices. Many of the struggles that Black women faced were internal to the Black community. By no means am I insinuating that Black women did not face a number of struggles external to the community, because they did and continuously do, especially with regard to their leadership journeys, support, and funding to sustain their practice. However, many of us have learned to cope by developing strong defense mechanisms to weather the storms that come against our communities from the outside but it's much harder to navigate the struggles within.

Codifying these thematic tensions that emerged across Black women, both internal and external to the Collective, the two biggest collective challenges can be articulated as (1) collaboration and relationship-building and (2) organizational efficiency and sustainability. Collaboration and relationship-building includes building partnerships and relationships within and outside of the organization, addressing intra-community issues, outreach and engagement, and emphasizes the importance of effective communication, team building, and support. The

theme of organizational efficiency and sustainability includes time management, quality of work and resources, and gatekeeping. It focuses on the importance of managing resources efficiently, maintaining the quality of work, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the organization. It includes an element of gatekeeping that is a measure to ensure that the organization stays true to its mission and values, in service to Black people and Black communities.

In addition, although Black women had their own self-definitions of Black liberation, some had visceral reactions to the term Black liberation. Some felt that it wasn't a term developed and defined by us but co-opted and often discussed by people outside of our community. As expressed, during the interviews, while asking BLO Leader Corinne about what it meant to do Black liberation work, she responded "Well, I'm, I'm not sure that the questions that you ask work for me…It's constantly farming in you. It's not like a set of stuff. And you get in that and you stay in it." For her, and others, the work that we're all out here doing is a way of life. It isn't a game or trendy topic of discussion. It isn't like we just woke up one day and decided, let me study Black liberation, and subsequently started moving toward this particular thing in a particular set of ways. We all recognize that there is a real need for our people here. We are dying. We are suffering. Whatever I, and other Black women, can do to leverage our talents to contribute to the betterment of our people, we will, in the name of Black liberation…or not.

Finally, I've attempted to make a case within the objectives of Diane Grimes' radical Black feminist perspective for how the work of Black women can influence organizational change and systemic change.

Chapter Six
Policy Brief: The Invisible Role of Black Women in Education Policy

Executive Summary

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for my degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Policy Studies in Urban Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I recently set out to understand how Black women leading Black-led organizations (BLOs) were working toward Black liberation. I knew that education was an important piece of the puzzle but if I'm completely honest with myself, I did not know the extent to which it would be a key driver of local progress. I was interested in how Black women leading BLOs drew on and mobilized their cultural, political, and intellectual assets to work toward significant policy change. I pursued such a research study because I believe that informing other Black women leaders and Black-led organizations about the unique, socially located resources related to leadership and liberation that could drive policy change from the ground up. In addition, it is my hope that policymakers and policy advocates who might access this brief, and are seeking innovation strategies of inclusion, will take seriously the educational practices of Black women enough to consider them in future processes of policy reform, formation, and/or change.

Through my research, I found that community-centered education models were a powerful tool for creating and stimulating systemic change. Various efforts were developed and used by local Black women on the south and west sides of Chicago to challenge existing power structures, create equitable access to resources, and empower their communities as they collectively worked toward social change. Education was used to foster critical thinking and promote social justice with a shared belief that by investing in education strategies, we can create a more equitable and just society. Specifically, the role of education for Black women was multi-faceted and involved various practices. Education and community engagement were important practices that brought people together to exchange ideas and collaborate on community projects. Experiential learning and the creation of accessible content were also

crucial, as they allowed Black women to acquire new skills and knowledge while making educational resources more widely available for the communities they served. Bringing together leaders from various sectors provided Black women with access to mentorship, networking opportunities, and the resources necessary to advance their careers. Professional development opportunities and ongoing learning enhanced skills and knowledge, leading to greater job opportunities and economic empowerment for Black communities.

Empowering people through community education programming efforts provided them with the knowledge and tools to take action in their communities. Glenn Laverack (2017), in his article "The challenge of behavior change and health promotion" discusses this from the perspective of empowering communities to promoting behaviorial change and improving health outcomes. He argues that community education programs are an effective way to empower people to take action in their communities. Community education programs, by providing people with the knowledge and tools they need to promote health and wellness, can help build community capacity and create sustainable change. As it pertains to the work of the BRC, leveraging action research connected the knowledge that one might typically receive in academic institutions to the needs of the community, helped to ensure that education was relevant and applicable. Utilizing workshops and other local events informed and mobilized communities, promoting collective action and advocacy. Bridging the gap between research and practice connected research to the needs of the community, ensuring that it is relevant and useful. Finally, using education to connect community members with resources and opportunities that align with their education level and interests empowered them to advocate for their needs and interests with their elected officials. Overall, education played a crucial role in empowering Black women to become leaders, advocates, and changemakers in their communities. The unconventional ways in which Black women promoted the use of education to accomplish key goals and engage their target demographics have implications for education policy.

This policy brief explores how Black women developing education programs in Chicago communities have had implications for education policy in the state of Illinois. To do so, I first provide an overview of the current state of education with a focus on Black women, the challenges they face, and the potential implications of their efforts on education policy. Drawing on the educational models and practices gleaned from the field, I then offer an analysis of the opportunities and challenges associated with Black women developing education programs in their communities. I conclude this policy brief by recommending strategies to ensure that the benefits of these programs are realized and that their challenges are addressed. This brief provides us with a new lens for us to view education policy; one that is inclusive of practitioners on the ground working toward racial equity and social change.

As a result, I believe education policy can be positively impacted by the community-centered education practices developed by Black women. Specifically, policy makers should consider the following implications:

- Increase funding and resources for community-centered education programs developed by Black women. This includes funding for research and evaluation of those program for efficacy, effectiveness, and continuous improvement.
- Develop policies that recognize the value of Black women in leading educational reform and include the full participation of Black women in the policy process. This includes creating policies that provide incentives for Black women to lead and participate in educational initiatives, and providing professional development or training opportunities for Black women to become fully emerged in the policy process.
- Promote systemic change. This includes prioritizing racial equity and ensuring that educational programs developed by Black women are not viewed as tokenistic or as a substitute for systemic change, and that these programs are seen as part of an overall strategy for improving education for all.

The recommended actions indicated by the analysis can produce positive outcomes across multiple stakeholders at the state and local level, and result in a more civically engaged and policy informed state with clear pipelines from the community to the policy process.

Introduction

Decades of education research has shown how Black women and girls historically have been overlooked and undervalued in the education system (Cooper, 2018; Tate & Linn, 2005; Zamani-Gallaher & Jones, 2017; Afolayan, 2019). Despite these experiences, Black women continue to take on unsolicited and often unrecognized leadership roles in developing formal and informal education programs in their communities toward to the end of building capacity to strengthen and sustain more equitable outcomes. Black women leaders have designed these programs to create access to and increase opportunities for educational resources and support for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) communities. The value of alternate education programs both in and beyond formal educational settings have been amplified by scholars for many years. For example, in *We Want to do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom,* Bettina Love (2019) advocates for the abolition of the current education system and proposes an alternative, abolitionist teaching, that prioritizes educational freedom for students of color and their communities. Janice Hale (2001) touches on this as well in her book, *Learning while Black: Creating educational excellence for African American children* when she proposes strategies for creating educational excellence for Black children, emphasizing the importance of cultural competence, community involvement, and an understanding of the historical context of Black education. As evidenced in this study and the literature, alternate community-based education programs are necessary for the advancement of equitable outcomes in Black communities. When asked what these educational programs look like, one BLO leader Jessica who co-founded a village of early learning centers and K-12 schools across Chicago shared the following.

Jessica: Uh, the core, our core work is really education. So, um, academic rigor…We

> have our grassroots campaigns, which is an integral part of what we do, which is kind of like community organizing, but for younger people. So we, we have them identify a problem in their community, they do research on it, they find allies, [because] there's so many wonderful things that are going on in, you know, in our areas. So finding people who are already doing the work, collaborating with them, and then finding something that they're going to do. So we've had amazing projects…And then the last thing, which we haven't done in a couple years, but we hope to restart for this year is the World Scholars Program where students self-select and they have to be kind of on that good behavior, um, trajectory in order to participate. Um, but they study a country of focus for the year. And then at the end of the year they do an educational excursion where we travel with our students to the [country]. So that starts, they can apply as early as third grade, but as third grade to eighth grade. And so we've been to Panama, we've been to um, Brazil, we've been to the Democratic Republic of Congo. We've been to South Africa, Cuba, um, Mexico, um, the [Dominican Republic]. We've been to Guatemala, Costa Rica. We've been to 11 countries so far. During the year of the pandemic, we were supposed to go to Rwanda [because] it's the only, um, predominantly women-led country, which is the most innovative in technology on the continent. Um, so we wanted our children to see that. Um, but COVID, so <laugh>, we hope to get that kind of going for this year, for 2023.

This village of high performing schools have been serving predominantly Black students for nearly 20 years through culturally relevant pedagogy and practices. Founded by a cadre of Black women, their approaches and education models include their collective and shared lived experiences as the blueprint for their practice. At traditional schools, Black students can go their entire educational journey without ever having access to leave the country, and in many cases, their neighborhood or side of town. The benefits of access and increased opportunities isn’t

unique to the program above. My research illuminated similar narratives across Black women developing community-centered models of education programming. As a result, the role of Black women leaders in educational development has implications for education policy.

Education policy has seen a shift in focus from simply delivering information to improving the learning process, and there is a tension that exists. The tension between improving the current public school system and creating alternative education pathways for Black children is explored in various works by scholars. For example, in Ladson-Billings' (2006) article, she argues that the achievement gap in U.S. schools is not just an issue of unequal funding, but rather an "education debt" owed to marginalized communities. Anyon's (2014) book discusses the need for a new social movement to challenge the status quo in urban education policy. Love's (2019) book promotes the idea of abolitionist teaching as a means of creating educational freedom for Black students. Morris' (2016) book explores the criminalization of Black girls in schools and how they are often disproportionately disciplined and pushed out. Losen and Gillespie’s (2000) book examines the consequences of zero-tolerance policies on Black, Latinx, and low-income students. Collins' (2017) article highlights the importance of intersectionality in addressing educational inequality. Hale's (2017) book advocates for creating educational excellence for Black children. While some scholars argue for the improvement of the current public school system to better serve Black children, others suggest the need for alternative education pathways to break away from a system that is inherently biased against our communities. Both approaches have their merits that are important to consider as we work towards creating a more equitable education system.

Nevertheless, the education policy agenda in states across the nation has evolved. For example, the current education policy agenda in Illinois is focused on improving student outcomes and closing the achievement gap. This includes key initiatives such as the Illinois State Board of Education's (ISBE) Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan, which focuses on

increasing access to high-quality instruction and improving student outcomes.[13] In addition, ISBE has implemented the Illinois Learning Standards, which are designed to ensure that all students have access to a high-quality education.[14] This slight pivot from the No Child Left Behind Act[15] was intended to provide states with more flexibility in how they use federal funds to support student learning with key foçi on equity and making sure that all students, regardless of their race or socioeconomic environment can receive the education they deserve. Currently, it is unclear whether there is a coherently coordinated education policy agenda at the state level in Illinois beyond this one. Nevertheless, on the strength of these priorities alone, we should be considering any and all education policy-relevant strategies that support increased educational opportunities for all.

As many may be aware, education policy is broader than students and schools. It encompasses a wide range of issues, including access to education, quality of instruction and resources, school funding, curriculum, and teacher accountability. Since so much of student experiences are impacted by what happens outside of school, I argue that education policy also includes community concerns, programs, and practices as well. Education policy not only impacts students, teachers, and administrators but the public, at large, and the policy decisions made at the state and local level can have far-reaching implications. As a result, examining policy-based reforms can be a useful approach to improving educational structures and processes by focusing on changing the policies, laws, and regulations that govern the system. We've seen many examples of this in recent years.

In "Learning to Improve," Tony Bryk and his colleagues highlight the need for educational systems to develop the capacity for continuous improvement through a community

[13] Regenstein, E., Boer, B., & Zavitkovsky, P. (2018). Establishing Achievable Goals: Recommendations for Improved Goal-Setting Under the Every Student Succeeds Act. Advance Illinois.
[14] Westbury, I. (2016). State-based curriculum-making: the Illinois Learning Standards. Journal of Curriculum Studies, 48(6), 783-802.
[15] Behind, N. C. L. (2002). No Child Left Behind Act. Washington, DC: US Department of Education.

engagement process of networked improvement communities of researchers and practitioners to accelerate systemic progress.[16] Design-based implementation research, as discussed by Fishman et al., emphasizes the role of practitioners in shaping education policies to better serve their needs by designing, implementing, and studying innovative programs and interventions in real-world settings.[17] Kurt Gutiérrez and Barbara Rogoff explore the relationship between culture and learning by arguing that cultural ways of learning are shaped by both individual traits and cultural repertoires of practice and suggest that an understanding of cultural ways of learning can help educators and policy makers develop more effective educational practices and policies that take into account the diversity of cultural backgrounds and experiences of students.[18] The list goes on and on. Perhaps one of the most salient and relevant reads is Tara Yosso's (2005) concept of "community cultural wealth". The concept is built on the idea that students of color bring valuable cultural resources and strengths with them to educational settings, even if these resources are not recognized or valued within mainstream education. The concept challenges the deficit-based view of students from historically marginalized communities and instead acknowledges the cultural assets they bring to the educational setting. Each and every one of the educational models of the Black women in my dissertation were built with community cultural wealth in mind. They may have not had the framework for it or read about it in a peer-reviewed journal, but conceptually, these are rooted in the lived experiences and assets of our communities. These programs are rooted in our history, in the legacy of the shoulders on which we stand, and developed and facilitated with the cultural attributes that we as Black women bring to the table.

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[16] Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better. Harvard Education Press.

[17] Fishman, B. J., Penuel, W. R., Allen, A. R., Cheng, B. H., & Sabelli, N. O. R. A. (2013). Design-based implementation research: An emerging model for transforming the relationship of research and practice. Teachers College Record, 115(14), 136-156.

[18] Gutiérrez, K. D., & Rogoff, B. (2003). Cultural ways of learning: Individual traits or repertoires of practice. Educational researcher, 32(5), 19-25.

Education policy-based reforms can take many forms from legislative changes (new laws, regulations, and mandates that govern educational systems), administrative policies (guidelines, procedures, and rules established by educational organizations, school boards, and administrative bodies), accountability systems (standardized testing and assessment programs that measure student performance and hold schools accountable for results), and financial incentives (funding programs that reward schools or teachers for specific achievements or performance goals) to technical assistance (providing support, resources, and training to schools, teachers, and educational leaders to improve their practices), professional development (training programs, workshops, and courses that help educators improve their skills and knowledge), collaborative partnerships (initiatives that bring together educators, policy makers, and other stakeholders to work together to improve educational outcomes), and instructional reforms (new curricula, teaching methods, and technologies that aim to improve student learning). Moreover, these reforms can include initiatives aimed at addressing systemic issues such as poverty, racism, and inequity.

In David Cohen and Jal Mehta's "Why Reform Sometimes Succeeds", they shed light on the conditions that lead to sustainable education reform, arguing that lasting reform requires a combination of policy, practice, and culture change.[19] Successful reforms are those that are well-designed, well-implemented, and well-aligned with the broader cultural, political, and economic context in which they are implemented which requires a deep understanding of the complexities of the education system and the interplay between policy, practice, and culture.

When I started on this journey a while ago, it was unclear the extent to which research was being used in education policy decisions and processes. In fact, an earlier iteration of my dissertation sought out to explore just that. Nevertheless, now that the field of research-on-research use (RRU) is growing and aims to understand the ways in which research is and can

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[19] Cohen, D. K., & Mehta, J. D. (2017). Why reform sometimes succeeds: Understanding the conditions that produce reforms that last. American educational research journal, 54(4), 644-690.

be used in educational policy and practice, there's an even stronger case to be made for grassroots and non-traditional forms of research, data, and best practices to be considered.[20]One of the primary offerings of my study to this brief is the exploration of how this body of research, about the leadership and education practices of Black women, can be leveraged in and have implications for educational policy processes.

Action 1: Increase funding and resources for programs developed by Black women

Black women have long been organizing and developing educational initiatives that focus on the needs of the Black community. One of the earliest examples of this is the establishment of the Colored Women's League[21] in 1892 by Mary Church Terrell, and a number of other Black women including Chicago's very own Ida B. Wells, who was the first Black woman to earn a college degree. The Colored Women's League was an organization that sought to promote education and racial equality. In the early 1900s, educator and activist Anna Julia Cooper founded the Colored Women's YMCA in Washington, DC. Under Cooper's leadership, the YMCA provided educational and vocational training for Black girls and women, as well as recreational activities. In addition, Cooper was a strong proponent of public education for Black children, and she was a vocal opponent of segregation in schools. In the 1950s, Ella Baker was a key figure in the civil rights movement. Baker was a staunch advocate of education, and she worked tirelessly to ensure that Black children had access to quality education. She organized the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which both worked to end segregation in public schools and provide resources to Black students.[22] Similar to the experiences of today's

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[20] Tseng, V. (2022). Research on Research Use: Building Theory, Empirical Evidence, and a Global Field. William T. Grant Foundation.

[21] Brooks, R. (2018). Looking to Foremothers for Strength: A Brief Biography of the Colored Woman's League. Women's Studies, 47(6), 609-616.

[22] Ransby, B. (2003). Ella Baker and the Black freedom movement: A radical democratic vision. Univ of North Carolina Press.

Black woman, their social positioning as Black women, gave them a unique perspective and set of experiences that contributed to their success in leading key movement efforts for Black people. They were all intimately familiar with the discrimination and systems of oppression that Black people faced across the nation. They had firsthand experience with the challenges of living in a society that was structured to disadvantage people of color and women. As women, they had to work harder to be taken seriously in male-dominated spaces, and this experience gave them unique perspective on power and leadership. Ella Baker, specifically, was able to see the ways in which power dynamics played out within the Civil Rights Movement, and she worked to create a more democratic and egalitarian movement that was led by the people it sought to represent (Bates, 2003; Zinn, 2010; Ransby, 2003). Their social positioning made them effective organizers. Leveraging this social positioning to bring people together for coalition building was essential to the success of all of their work.

These are just a few examples of Black women who led the charge for educational initiatives in Black communities. Throughout history, these women and countless others have played a critical role in spearheading educational initiatives and advocating for educational justice for Black people. Black women developing education programs in the community have had a tremendous impact on the Black community. These initiatives have provided educational resources and opportunities, while also helping to create a sense of community and solidarity among Black people. One of the most significant impacts of these initiatives is the increased access to educational resources and opportunities that they have provided. Many of these programs have enabled Black people to gain access to higher education, while also providing support and resources to help students succeed in college. Over the years, these programs have also provided Black students with the resources they need to pursue a career in a field of their choosing. The history of Black women fighting for increased access in education have had residual efforts that positively impact Black women to this day.

In my recent study of Black women and their leadership practices in Chicago, I found that 100 percent of the Black women interviewed (24 of 24) who were leading and/or contributing to Black-led organizations were college educated, and many possessed advanced degrees. Their college experiences had a tremendous impact on their career trajectory and life journey. Most of them (79 percent) attended Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Although only 21 percent of Black women attended a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), at least 32 percent of those who did attend a PWI expressed an initial desire to attend an HBCU. Nevertheless, the majority of Black women (58 percent) attended college in the state of Illinois and have since deeply contributed to the viability of local communities; 71 percent of whom were a founding member of the organization that they served. Speaking to the local connection, one Black woman shared, "I wanted to have something that was somewhat in close proximity to [my home] and benefit from the Illinois tuition…I'm from Chicago, so I wanted to be away <laugh> from home, but I didn't wanna be like in another state. And I was trying to also be conscious about how much tuition cost." This sentiment was shared by a number of Black women who decided to attend PWIs close to home. I had a similar rationale, due to my family commitments, in my school selection decision. Per my analysis of the collective college experience of Black women, they faced numerous limitations and barriers that often attempted to prevent them from reaching their full potential. Despite these challenges, Black women in the study overcame these obstacles and went on to have successful careers and lives. Their college experiences, at both Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), have been integral in shaping our life journeys.

One of the most important aspects of their college experiences was overcoming the limitations and access to opportunities that come with being a Black woman. These experiences taught us the importance of perseverance and resilience in the face of adversity. Moreover, it emphasized the significance of diversity and the need to learn from others to combat racism. This helped us understand the interconnection of all things and the impact of societal factors on

communities. Navigating and addressing institutional racism in higher education was another crucial aspect of our college experiences. The challenges we faced helped us develop critical skills in navigating and addressing systemic obstacles, which have been instrumental in our personal and professional growth. This experience has taught Black women the importance of advocating for oneself and for others, especially those who face similar obstacles. This much was demonstrated through Black women's development and execution of community-centered education programs and practices in their communities.

Our college experiences also allowed us to prioritize inclusivity and being lifelong learners. Our experiences at PWIs and HBCUs were different and have shaped our perspectives on engagement with those outside of our subcultural communities. These diverse experiences exposed us to different environments and supported our personal identity and career exploration. Furthermore, our active involvement in these institutions helped us navigate life after college and provided us with career opportunities and references. Additionally, our college experiences allowed us to build connections and relationships that continue to serve as references and resources in our lives to this day. These relationships have provided us with a support system and have been invaluable to our personal and professional growth, having had a profound impact on our lives. For example, one BLO leader Drea described her college experience as "formative" and had the following to say about how it has shaped her journey.

Glenance: How did your college experiences shape your journey?

Drea: Oh, man, <laugh>, um, incredibly formative. So I would say I, I found high school really challenging in that I was experiencing the world before I had language and power to do something about it. And so it was this incredibly destabilizing moment for me, I think. And I think when I got to college, I was so like hungry for spaces to cultivate my own voice and cultivate my own personhood, I think in a lot of ways. And so what Duke, in particular, I think allowed for me was to be in all these interdisciplinary

spaces and always thinking about these moments of intersection both in my community organizing work and also in my coursework….Um, the research opportunities there allowed me to think, just, just think more intersectionally, I think was super important. And then it was such fertile ground for me as a community organizer. And so it's where I learned my leadership style and I think, um, particularly leadership within Black spaces, uh, being on the leadership of our National Society of Black Engineers and our, um, our Black Student Alliance. And so it was a space that taught me who, who I wanted to be as a leader and why I wanted to lead in those spaces. So super formative I think for that. Just how I think and the type of leader I am.

These kind of college experiences faced by Black women were pivotal in formally establishing and applying foundational leadership skills and seeding key ideas. The cultivation of our own practices and the desire to build something that reflects who we are, how we learn, and where were come from—spun of our own interests and values—emerged and/or was strengthened through our college experiences. Evidence of this is best demonstrated through the perspective of another BLO leader Pam who had the following to say about her college experience.

Pam: …I think I was constantly like supporting my own interests and my own practice…I got really serious, um, the last two years, my junior and senior year and like became hyper focused and really was interested in just writing and doing as much as I could, um, to support. So hence like the independent study project. And, um, working with my professor, I was going to office hours and things, but I didn't like, now that I'm thinking about it, like most of my teachers were, were white and also like, yeah, mostly white and mostly men. So I think that I was craving like seeing some aspect of myself, but I didn't really like discover myself in like, my

> place within the community until I moved to Chicago. Cause I went to such a school like that.

These types of experiences have inspired and helped to create a sense of community and solidarity among Black women. They have also provided a space to come together and learn from each other, as well as support one another in our educational pursuits. This sense of community has been invaluable in helping overcome educational and social barriers. Ultimately, these community connections led to a number of successful career endeavors for Black women, including their commitments to strengthening the viability of their communities which has resulted in the development of programs and initiatives that hinge on educating communities to extend their capacity for sustainability accordingly.

There are a number of studies on Black-led organizations and their relationship to philanthropy (Kilkenny, 2018; Emergent Pathways, 2019; Walker & Walker, 2015; Batten & Williams, 2017; MWR Consulting, 2018), a relationship that can impact the work that Black women leading organizations are able to take up and advance substantively, including policy. In fact, a recent study published by the Chronicle of Philanthropy reported that nonprofits led by people of color secure less grant money for their organizational work and are trusted less to make decisions about how to spend those funds than groups with white leaders.[23] Moreover, organizations led by Black women received less money than those led by Black men or white women. These examples illustrate the devaluing of Black women leaders and Black-led organizations, which circumscribes their capacity to impact the policy environment. In recognizing Black women leaders as uniquely positioned to effect change in their communities, policymakers therefore must increase funding and resources for programs developed by Black women. Providing funding and resources for programs developed by Black women will not only

[23] Rendon, J. (2020). Nonprofits led by people of color win less grant money with more strings. Chronicle of Philanthropy. Retrieved from https://www.philanthropy.com/article/nonprofits-led-by-people-of-color-win-less-grant-money-with-more-strings-study/

empower them but may also have a positive impact on students, communities, and the education system as a whole. Moreover, the collective ways in which Black women historically and presently have developed community-centered education programming could inform the curriculum practices of others across the state working within and outside of K-12 and post-secondary education-specific environments, evident in the rise of Afrocentric curricula and the integration of Black studies into K-12 schooling.

Black women have long been at the helm of movements and initiatives that prioritize the needs of the Black community, and their role in developing education programs is no different. The practical application of education programs developed by Black women in my study yielded a number of benefits for the community, including but not limited to:

- Empowerment of Black youth and community development
- Increased community engagement and elected official accountability
- Improved educational outcomes
- Increased opportunities for professional development, employment, and career growth
- High-quality medical care to the black community
- Preservation of heritage, legacy, and history
- Strengthening community through a repository of black culture, collective processing, and artistic contributions
- Creating sustainable conditions for long-term wellness, self-determination, and resilience through education, employment, housing, business, and leadership
- Making research accessible to communities for practical use
- Developing a pipeline of civic researchers to lead community-based research strategies for grassroots policy-relevant interests

Programs developed by Black women have been increasing access to educational resources and outcomes for communities. Black women are often at the forefront of community activism and advocacy in Chicago, and their leadership and expertise is invaluable in creating

change. Increasing funding and resources for programs developed by Black women can be a helpful step in creating a more equitable and just education system. These programs provide a valuable perspective, empower communities, and may improve educational outcomes. Education policy makers must prioritize funding and resources for community-centered educational programs developed by Black women, including funding for research, professional development, and other necessary resources. This will help ensure that future generations of Black women have the same opportunities for success and personal growth that they've fought (and are still fighting) hard to have.

One final point that I'll make here is that funding is essential for Black women to continue to make progress in their respective fields. Research is necessary to understand the complex issues and contributions experienced by Black women today, and to develop effective solutions, and my study attempts to tease out both to understand the potential gaps as it pertains to education policy. Overall, given the implications for education policy, I argue that policy makers have a responsibility to increase funding and resources for education programs developed by Black women. The important contributions we make to our society deserve to be recognized, and they should be given the necessary tools to continue making progress. By investing in Black women, policy makers will be investing in a brighter future for us all.

Action 2: Develop policies that recognize the value of Black women in leading educational reform and include the full participation of Black women in the policy process

Though not always recognized, Black women have been a driving force in the development of education programs and initiatives throughout history and their efforts have had a lasting impact on education policy. In the 20th century, Black women were leaders in educational reform. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black women were instrumental in the development of Head Start, a federal program designed to provide comprehensive educational, health, and welfare services to low-income preschool-aged children and their families. Black

women also played a critical role in the desegregation movement, advocating for the integration of schools and the development of educational programs that served both white and Black students. Today, Black women still continue to be leaders in education policy. In recent years, Black women have championed efforts to ensure that all students have access to a quality education. Black women have advocated for increased funding for public education, as well as for policies that promote equity and access to resources. We have also pushed for policies that address the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates of Black students, and for the implementation of restorative justice practices in schools, particularly with the passage of one of the most transformative pieces of legislation concerning school discipline in the state of Illinois in 2014, SB 100.

In addition, similar to the passage from the BLO leader shared in the section above, Black women have been instrumental in the development of programs that promote student success. These programs include initiatives such as after-school programs, mentoring programs, and college access programs. These programs provide students with the resources and support the need to succeed academically and in their future endeavors. In spite of all of these efforts, Black women and girls are still being undervalued in educational reform initiatives. In "Black Girls Matter," Jeffery Duncan-Andrade (2021) argues that current educational reforms often fail to address the unique needs of Black girls and perpetuate inequities. In "An intersectional approach to examining the educational experiences of Black girls," Angela Harris (2019) emphasizes the need for educators and policymakers to consider the experiences of Black girls when designing and implementing educational policies. Despite our tremendous contributions, we have often been overlooked, particularly concerning policy and in positions of leadership. In "Beyond the 'angry Black woman' trope," Tiffany Jackson (2020) examines the intersection of race and gender, and how these factors contribute to the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership roles in education. Black women have a unique perspective and understanding of the challenges faced by their communities, particularly in the realm of

education. The same knowledge, skills, and cultural assets that were helpful to achieving progress and success in previous education reforms led Black women are being translated into practice in their communities but with little to no institutional supports. Moreover, we have the drive and determination to create change but are often limited by systemic barriers that prevent us from fully participating in the reform process. To overcome these barriers, education policy makers must create policies that provide opportunities and incentives for Black women to lead and participate in educational reform initiatives. In addition, policy makers must include the full participation of Black women in the policy process. It is critical that we recognize the value of Black women in leading educational reform, especially those with alternative approaches to traditional ways of learning. One of the things that makes these community-centered models so special is that they're culturally responsive and tailed to the people they serve, unlike traditional models of learning, for K-12 and Adult Education. The current system is not an equitable one for Black women and other marginalized groups. Black women often face barriers, including the lack of access to resources, inadequate training, and a lack of representation in policy decision-making processes. This lack of representation has led to Black women being excluded from key policy conversations and subsequently, our voices not being heard, despite the impact of education policy in our communities.

One way to address this is by providing financial and other resources to support the full participation of Black women leading education work in Black serving organizations. These organizations play a crucial role in addressing the educational needs of their communities and promoting new pipelines for access and opportunity. I would like to acknowledge that this body of work does not really explore how Black women might leverage their practices to specifically change various aspects of education policy. Instead, it really focuses on access and opportunity areas for consideration to alternative education models and beyond. This work leverages a both/and perspective that is both a call to action for education policy reform and the creation of alternative structures. It endorses a both an abolitionist framework as the ultimate goal for

enhancing equitable educational outcomes and amplifies the necessity of essential reforms along the way.

In my study, the challenges faced by Black women leading Black-led organizations in Chicago were numerous and complex. Despite the crucial role these organizations play in uplifting Black communities, 88 percent of Black women in the study often faced limitations in resources, funding, and work capacity. This made it difficult for them to achieve their goals and provide the necessary support to their people. Internal to the Black Researchers Collective, our Co-Founder had the following to say about navigating through funding challenges.

> "It's just hard knowing that there is so much to do and wanting to do so much and knowing that if we had three times as much money or five times or 10 times as much money, we could hire so many more people and this could be off to the races. I just feel like we got our foot on the brake and foot on the gas, how that feels in a car… That's the hard part…I think what is really beautiful in terms of the time of where we live is that we can make our message fly further with the money that we have than we ever could have in the past because of the resources of the internet and social media…it is critical in terms of us being able to get our message out."

As with the Black Researchers Collective, many of these Black women-led organizations had to navigate a complex non-profit landscape and therefore worked to build trust and support from the communities they serve. Maintaining high quality standards was crucial, as organizations tried hard to avoid overcommitment yet simultaneously ensure that they were delivering services of the highest quality.

The impact of COVID-19 was significant for many Black-led organizations, as they had to adapt to new ways of engaging their people and delivering services in the face of the pandemic. Despite these obstacles, they still delivered. Personal challenges such as balancing time and prioritizing the work of the organization also posed a significant challenge to leaders,

yet no programs were stalled. For example, one Board member shared the following about her challenges with regard to prioritizing the work during the pandemic.

> …But we've been impacted by COVID so much greatly. I think now that we can come together and have a lot more planning sessions in person, for me, in person matters. I think that's the biggest, I don't wanna say downfall, but I think that has decreased our engagement with each other. That, yeah, that's just my opinion."

In addition to these challenges, Black-led organizations faced difficulties in securing funding and hiring specialized staff. Building and maintaining a team was difficult, as leaders navigated the challenges of sharing loads of labor and ensuring that institutional knowledge was passed down effectively. Ultimately, the key to overcoming some of these challenges for them was to maintain focus on the organization's mission and principles while also prioritizing sustainability and fundraising demonstrating the perseverance and resilience of Black women. Despite the ongoing challenges and pitfalls that Black women faced, they still prioritized the education of our communities because they understood the significance of its value, especially for Black people. This is why policymaking and system navigation is so important, as Black women leaders must constantly work to ensure that their organization remains relevant to their audience and continue making strides toward positive impact in their communities. There is so much at stake if they were to fail.

The role of Black women in leading these organizations is critical, and policy makers must work to create policies that support and empower them in their efforts. Providing them with the necessary resources can help ensure that their efforts are successful and have a lasting impact. Another way to support Black women in leading educational reform is through professional development opportunities that support their full participation in the policymaking process. Providing opportunities for Black women to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to be effective policy leaders in the field of education can go a long way in promoting their success. This could include opportunities for training and mentorship, as well as programs that

help Black women network and build connections with other education policy leaders, as many Black women are concerned with the impact of policy issues, more broadly, on their everyday lives.

For example, my study found that the majority of Black women in my sample (67 percent) thought about the role of policy and how it directly related to their organizational goals. One BLO demonstrated evidence of this when she expressed the following.

Isis: …We have to really consult with community on a statewide basis. And I think that when you talk about policy, some of these issues that we have and the state that are affecting Black people seem intractable. They've been here forever. And so when one considers what those policy opportunities and policy targets look like, I think it's going to be like, is there low hanging fruit? Are there some things that we can actually cause to happen fairly soon? Because as we all know, some of these policy campaigns can take years to win. Absolutely. I think we have to be very critical and smart about short- and long-term opportunities and goals and what that looks like. And to get in front of the policy, we have to build the base. So the extent to which we have a strong and stride and constituency that’s statewide is going to be invaluable and essential. So it's sort of pulling all of these things together.

This passage, and other narratives of Black women, demonstrates that Black women with policy goals or policy interests oriented their work on addressing issues with disparate impacts on the Black community. The top eight policy relevant goals and practices that Black women explicitly shared were to: (1) build capacity and empower communities to influence policy change; (2) provide data-driven policy recommendations based on community-based research; (3) foster Black liberation and self-development; (4) educate and engaging community members in the policymaking process; (5) hold policy makers accountable to the needs and demands of the community; (6) build a strong and diverse constituency to support policy goals; (7) use art as a

tool to educate the public and raise awareness about complex issues; and (8) center environmental justice within social justice, including the approval of certain types of development in communities and addressing disparities in parking tickets, traffic violations, and bike fines. Overall, Black women's policy goals aimed to address systemic concerns expressed by their communities. In our conversations, they spoke to need for reparations, eliminating institutional racism and systemic discrimination, and increasing Black capital. When Black women thought about the overall health and wellness of their communities, they often thought about policy. When Black women thought about policy, they did not have the privilege of only focusing on one component because they recognized how they were impacted by multiple systems of oppression simultaneously, as evidenced by their articulation of larger policy issues more broadly. Understanding this, Black women are most qualified to be working at various points along the policy spectrum.

The importance of Black women in educational reform cannot be overstated. We bring a unique perspective and experience to the table that can help inform policy and spark meaningful change. Black women have a deep understanding of the challenges facing the community, as well as the potential solutions. It is important for education policy makers to recognize the role that Black women play in shaping the perspectives and experiences of the next generation. We are powerful advocates of educational equity and have a history of success in leading grassroots educational reform initiatives in our communities. Education policy makers have a unique opportunity to support Black women in leading educational reform. Creating policies that provide opportunities and incentives for them to participate in the reform process can help ensure that our communities are equipped with the resources and support needed to achieve a more equitable and people-centered process. It is time for education policy makers to step up and invest in the future of our communities by supporting the vital work of Black women elevating key education priorities across various fields.

Action 3: Promote systemic change

Black women-led organizations in Chicago are advocating for equity and using education as a tool to empower people and communities. In my study, 71 percent of the Black women who highlighted the role of education in their organizations indicated an importance of prioritizing equity in their leadership decisions, which served their organizations well. Education and community engagement are at the core of Black women-led organizations. With community-based education programs and models, these organizations are working to address disparities that exist within the Black community. They are also using education as a tool of advocacy to promote empathy, bridge-building, and racial equity.

Experiential learning was another key component of Black women-led organizations in Chicago. For example, some worked with survivors of sexual trauma to reimagine public safety, or create accessible content, such as one-pagers that break down complex policies into language that was easy to understand. These organizations also used various forms of education to promote equity and push for equitable outcomes to amplify their reach. In addition to their focus on education and community engagement, Black women-led organizations brought together leaders from various sectors to have a broader impact. Through community convenings, group discussions, and collective knowledge sharing, they engaged the people they serve in ongoing learning opportunities to build their capacity to shape their life outcomes.

Black women-led organizations have bridged the gap between research and practice by using participatory action research to connect knowledge from institutions to the needs of the community. Through workshops, coffee chats, and other events, they have informed and mobilized communities, and connected them with resources and opportunities that align with their education level and interests. Black women-led organizations have played a crucial role in promoting educational equity and empowering communities through education. If all of these achievements can be accomplished on a local level by cadre of Black women with limited resources, imagine what could be possible on a state level when education policy makers better

leverage equity in their policy decisions. Perhaps this prioritization will ensure that our efforts are supported through adequate funding, resources, and recognition as well. By working together, we can create a more equitable and just educational system for all.

Educational equity is not just about providing access to the same resources; it is also about creating an environment where everyone feels safe and respected. This means that policies should ensure that all students are treated fairly and given equitable access to opportunities. In addition to providing access to quality education, educational equity also means that all students should have access to resources and supports according to the extent of their needs. In a more traditional sense, this means that policies should ensure that students have access to a multitude of resources such as textbooks, technology, and extracurricular activities. It also means that policies should ensure that students have access to the wraparound supports such as tutoring, counseling, mental health services, and mentoring; programs that are currently serving students in predominantly Black neighborhoods external to schools through community-centered education programming.

Prioritizing educational equity means that all students should have fair access to opportunities for success, this includes policies that ensure that all students have equal access to college, career, and vocational opportunities; another area that is facilitated through community-centered education programming in predominantly Black neighborhoods. In short, educational equity should be the priority in all policy decisions. Policies should not only ensure that all students have access to resources, supports, and opportunities but also ensure that students are treated fairly and given the same opportunities, regardless of their race or the neighborhood school that they attend. All students deserve the opportunity to receive a high-quality education that prepares them for success in life, regardless of their background or circumstances. Policies that promote educational equity ensure that all students have access to the resources and support they need to succeed in the classroom and beyond, and the community-centered educational practices of Black women in communities can help us get

there. Policy makers can ensure that all students have the educational opportunities tailored to their needs and a fair chance at success.

Summary

The development of culturally responsive education programs in their communities by Black women has the potential to have significant implications for education policy. These programs can provide an opportunity for Black women to create and implement programs that are tailored to the needs of their communities and that can address the challenges they on a state and local level. Additionally, these programs can provide Black women with an opportunity to gain experience in educational leadership and develop a stronger presence in education policy decision-making processes. These initiatives have highlighted the need for increased access, including educational resources and opportunities for Black students. As such, education policy should focus on increasing access to community-centered educational resources and opportunities that might better inform formal academic environments across the state.

There are both opportunities and challenges associated with Black women developing education programs in their communities. On one hand, these programs provide much needed resources to Black communities and offer an opportunity for Black women to gain experience in educational leadership. On the other hand, these programs face a number of potential challenges. These include a lack of resources, a lack of access to key policy decision-making processes that could strengthen their work and capacity to serve, and the potential for these programs to be viewed as tokenistic or as a substitute for systemic change.

The educational initiatives of Black women-led organization have demonstrated the importance of creating a space for people to come together and learn from each other, as well as to support one another in their independent and collective educational pursuits. Education policy could tremendously benefit from creating an inclusive atmosphere in educational

institutions, as well as providing culturally responsive resources and support to Black students. In the meantime, education policy should focus on providing resources and support to Black women who are leading the charge for educational initiatives in the community to ensure that they are recognized and supported for their efforts of strengthening and building capacity for communities.

This policy brief has explored how Black women developing education programs in the community have implications for education policy. Education programs developed by Black women can have a positive impact on education policy. Policy makers should recognize the value of these programs and develop policies that support their continued growth and development. With the right policies in place, Black women can continue to lead the way in reforming our education system for the benefit of all students. In order to ensure that the potential benefits of programs developed by Black women in their communities are realized and that the potential challenges are addressed, the following strategies should be implemented:

- Increase resources available to Black women-led education programs: This includes increasing funding and resources for programs and community-centered initiatives developed by Black women.
- Ensure Black women's access to decision-making processes: This includes providing access to educational policy decision-making processes, and providing access to mentorship and training opportunities to support the pipeline for full participation.
- Promote systemic change: This includes prioritizing equity and ensuring that educational programs developed by Black women are not viewed as tokenistic or as a substitute for systemic change, and that these programs are seen as part of an overall strategy for improving education for all.

This policy brief has provided an overview of the potential implications of Black women developing education programs in their communities for education policy. It has also provided an analysis of the opportunities and challenges associated with these programs. Finally, it has

provided recommendations for ensuring that the benefits of these programs are realized and that their challenges are addressed. It is clear that Black women developing education programs in their communities have the potential to have implications for education policy, and therefore it is important to ensure that these programs are supported and so that their challenges are addressed. The efforts of Black women have helped to create a more equitable educational system and have provided resources and supports needed to succeed academically and beyond. The impact of Black women on education policy is undeniable, and their efforts will continue to shape the future of education policy for years to come.

Chapter Seven
Conclusion: The end…for now

This body of research explored how Black women leading Black-led organizations (BLOs) work toward Black liberation, and the characteristics or attributes that exist across Black-led organizations (BLOs) led by Black women. This study sought to explore how Black women lead and whether the approaches they are using to help us get free leverage similar strategies, independent of one another. Throughout this dissertation, I attempted to make the case for my argument that education policy must be contextual and rooted in the assets and educational practices of the communities most harmed and historically disproportionately impacted, particularly those led by Black women. They are policy entrepreneurs that have not been seriously considered in the policy process. I have leveraged Black Feminist Thought and radical Black feminism as the overarching theoretical frameworks to tell this story. I also provided evidence to make the case for my argument that, based on our collective marginalized identities of being Black and woman, we negotiate and navigate policy-relevant priorities in alignment with the expertise of our lived experiences to strategically advance an agenda toward the liberation of all people.

Black Feminist Thought argues that the experiences of Black women are shaped by the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism, and that these systems of oppression cannot be understood or addressed separately from each other. Elevating Black Feminist Thought, the perspectives and experiences shared in this study were not meant to simply contribute to an intellectual exercise. They were meant to help us understand some alternative ways of being and doing that are more conducive to the communities that we serve and they context in which we live; and those things not only have real value but real material consequences for Black communities. Black women are leading the charge. Radical Black feminisms employs an explicitly radical political analysis and recognizes the fundamental interconnections of multiple systems of oppression and is committed to the liberation of those impacted at the center. Just

as with Black Feminist Thought, Black women were focused on leveraging what we know to do something different, amplifying the work of radical Black feminisms. That radical transformation in the context of this study was to advance more equitable outcomes. Healing justice frameworks prioritize the healing and wellbeing of our communities and emphasize the importance of healing justice as a form of resistance and liberation. In this study, Black women across Chicago are creating spaces and programming with collective healing in mind as they work toward restoring our communities to wholeness to remove obstacles that might prevent us from collectively building together on our journey toward systemic change. Abolition feminism is a framework that emphasizes the need for collective liberation through the dismantling of the systems that perpetuate oppression. It seeks to abolish not only patriarchy but also racism, capitalism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression. In the context of this study, Black women are creating new conditions for safe environments on their blocks and in the communities that don't require them to rely on structures of violence that profit on the killing of the black body but instead on the nourishment of our whole being. In *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack (2013) writes that "Afrofuturism is a way of recognizing the potential for liberation that lies within the Black experience. By imagining ourselves in new and different worlds, we can begin to imagine the possibilities for a different kind of future, one that is not constrained by the limitations of our present reality." In this study, I grounded Black liberation in the context of Afrofuturism because of this. We must first acknowledge, imagine, and believe in the possibilities before we can manifest them into existence through our struggles for freedom. This reimagining and desire to live our best lives as we see fit for ourselves is at the core of why we fight against white supremacist structures to begin with.

The key findings can be best articulated in terms of triumphs and tensions. There were a lot of really great things that emerged within and beyond the Black Researchers Collective, in terms of the work that's being done in Black communities. However, there were some tensions

that emerged in the work as well. The study findings for each are described in the section below.

Triumphs: Specific to the Black Researchers Collective (N=43)

Finding 1. The educational practices of the Black Researchers Collective, via the Community Workshop Intensive, were of value and significance to Chicago's south side communities. In fact, the study findings have demonstrated that this community education model have yielded early successes. The Black Researchers Collective's Community Workshop Intensive is a distinctive educational approach that is intensely critical and politically conscious. It is based on collective lived experiences and espouses radical Black feminist values and ideologies. The primary aim of this workshop is to equip communities with research skills that they can utilize. In the span of three days, the twelve-hour program trains participants on how to identify policy-relevant issues, convert them into actionable plans, and utilize research tools as a capacity-building mechanism for parents, grassroots leaders, organizers, and advocates.

Overall, participants left the workshops positively impacted by and through the process. For example, approximately 95 percent of participants reported increased knowledge and/or experience with research; 86 percent reported increased levels of community engagement; and 77 percent reported increased knowledge and/or experience with policy as a result of their participation in the BRC's Community Workshop Intensive. Over the course of 15 months, Black Researchers Collective conducted 60 hours of in-person trainings through our Community Workshop Intensives that led to the launching of 16 community-led projects across Bronzeville, Woodlawn, Washington Park, South Shore, and South Chicago.

Triumphs: Black women internal and external to the Black Researchers Collective (N=24)

These findings are a coalescing of the theoretical frameworks previously mentioned through the collective practices of Black women as alternatives to the harmful or non-existent structures that we regularly experience.

Finding 2. Black women are resisting through education—Black women across the south and west sides of Chicago are developing, curating, and employing various education models in community as a key mechanism to collectively resist systems of oppression and help us get free.

The educational initiatives of Black women-led organizations have demonstrated the importance of creating a space for people to come together and learn from each other, as well as to support one another in their independent and collective educational pursuits, including but not limited to the following below.

- ◊ Empowerment of Black youth and community development
- ◊ Increased community engagement and elected official accountability
- ◊ Increased culturally responsive K-12 academic outcomes
- ◊ Increased opportunities for professional development, employment, and career growth
- ◊ High-quality medical and mental care to the black community
- ◊ Preservation of heritage, legacy, and history
- ◊ Strengthening community through a repository of black culture, collective processing, and artistic contributions
- ◊ Creating sustainable conditions for long-term wellness, self-determination, and resilience through education, employment, housing, business, and leadership
- ◊ Making research accessible to communities for practical use
- ◊ Developing a pipeline of civic researchers to lead community-based research strategies for grassroots policy-relevant interests

Finding 3. Overall, the study participants were relatively young Black women serving in key leadership roles—the majority of whom (66 percent) where under the age of 45—in fairly new organizations, many of which they founded or contributed to founding.

The core areas of work for all Black organizations in the study aimed at empowering and uplifting the Black community. The majority of Black women (68 percent) uplifted the value of the experiential nature of their work as a framework of its own for others to model their practices after. They are using their lived experiences and values as the north star to guide their practice. These women leading Black organizations are working to address issues through various culturally responsive practices to healing our communities; they are proactively informally contributing to their own healing justice frameworks while they challenge dominant narratives and oppressive systems in the legacy of Black Feminist Thought, radical Black feminism, and abolitionist feminism. Their focus was on creating spaces where these needs are met in abundance and where people can express themselves fully and authentically.

Finding 4. Black women are self-defining, leading, and working toward Black liberation in similar ways. Black women were constantly leveraging their cultural attributes and assets in their decision-making practices, and collectively, they determined what they perceived to be organizational ‘wins’ with regard to making progress toward Black liberation in a similar fashion.

Collectively, Black women determined wins as small, measurable, micro-level, and achievable. The biggest wins across organizations pertained to (1) community engagement and outreach, (2) accomplishments and growth, (3) internal collaboration and voice, (4) progress towards goals, and (5) metrics and outcomes. The spaces that Black women are leading, are active sites of resistance. The work of Black women can influence organizational, systemic, and policy change. The organizations that Black women are leading in communities reflect community-centered education models which are a powerful tool for creating and stimulating systemic change. Various efforts were developed and used by local Black women on the south and west sides of Chicago to challenge existing power structures, create equitable access to resources, and empower their communities as they collectively worked toward social change. Education was also used to foster critical thinking, build community capacity, celebrate Black

life, and promote social justice with a shared belief that investing in education strategies can yield more equitable outcomes.

Finding 5. Our cultural attributes, derived from our lived experiences as Black women, are shared and deeply influential both in our leadership practices and that ways in which we approach and address systemic issues in our communities. Moreover, their experiences of being a Black woman in the world heavily influenced the kind of leader that Black women became. The qualities of Black women became the primary culture and values of the organizations that they led. In other words, who Black women were in the world became an integral component of the organization culture.

The common leadership attributes among women in BLOs (n=15) were community-centered leadership, team-centered leadership, servant leadership, responsive and hands-on leadership, and authentic and empathetic leadership. While these attributes overlapped across several categories, most of the self-described leader attributes aligned with being responsive and hands-on. As for the women of BRC, their leadership attributes were categorized as collaborative and inclusive, strategic, empowering and capacity-building, flexible and open to feedback, valuing the perspectives of others, and focused on addressing historical injustices and inequities faced by Black people in professional settings. The characteristics of the organizations mentioned by Black women both within and outside the collective were a direct reflection of their personal attributes, closely aligned with their interests and skills demonstrated in the organization's mission, core work, and vision. Since the majority of these women work within organizations founded by them, it suggests that the qualities of Black women become the primary culture and values of the organization. Therefore, the organizational fabric and structure embody the collective spirit and heart of Black women, which reflects a Black feminist consciousness.

Finding 6. Black women are leading as a labor of love, with their Afrofuturistic collective vision of liberation in mind, rooted in their lived experiences and perspectives. Black liberation,

according to Black women, refers to the removal of systemic barriers that prevent Black people from achieving their goals and aspirations, and involves honoring their legacy, controlling their resources and community, achieving self-expression and education, addressing historical harm and reparations, and promoting intersectionality and community unity. This singular definition was crafted from the collective self-definitions of all the Black women interviewed.

Tensions: Specific to the Black Researchers Collective (N=43)

Finding 7. Despite the positive outcomes of this model, nearly a quarter of Community Workshop Intensive participants (23 percent or 10 out of 43) reported having about the same level of knowledge or experience with policy as they did prior to the workshop, suggesting (1) that the program had no impact on some participants' knowledge or experience with policy and (2) our education model lacks a strong connection to and/or amplification of relevant policy. Given our mission to train and equip communities with research tools to be more civically engaged and policy informed, this is very much an area of necessary improvement.

Finding 8. Many of the community projects did not get fully executed as anticipated so we leveraged the preliminary findings of this study for continuous improvement, to deepen our work in Fiscal Year 2023. Instead of rolling out a new set of workshops in a new set of communities, we decided to go back to those very same communities for another year and focus on activating those community projects as a sustainability effort in community. We recognize that these efforts take time and resources, so our year two community model includes incentivizing key milestones for progress and mobilization and a series of workshop intensives tailored toward the needs of the community project. We are currently in the process of interviewing all of our workshop participants to determine which projects will move forward as a result of the gaps in this work.

Tensions: Black women internal and external to the Black Researchers Collective (N=24)

Finding 9. Funding the work. To avoid being redundant, I'll just mention that Black women need more money for this important work.

Finding 10. Two of the biggest collective challenges can be articulated as (1) collaboration and relationship-building and (2) organizational efficiency and sustainability.

The act of collaboration and relationship-building involves creating partnerships and connections both within and beyond the organization. This includes dealing with issues that exist within the community, engaging with and reaching out to others, and highlighting the significance of effective communication, team-building, and support. Meanwhile, the theme of organizational efficiency and sustainability centers on managing time effectively, maximizing the quality of work and resources, and practicing gatekeeping. This approach emphasizes the importance of using resources in an effective and sustainable manner, maintaining high-quality work, and ensuring that the organization stays true to its mission and values, all while serving the needs of Black people and communities.

Finding 11. Despite Black women leading and self-defining their work in these meaningful ways, they faced a number of challenges with regard to intra-community struggles that directly impacted their work and reflections of their leadership practices.

Numerous challenges confronted Black women, some of which were rooted within the Black community. Although external factors such as obstacles in securing funding, support, and leadership roles remain significant hurdles for Black women, many also had to navigate complex internal struggles. While they may have developed effective defense mechanisms to face the external forces that impact their communities, navigating the internal issues proved to be much more difficult.

Limitations and Self-Critiques

As articulated in Chapter Five, I have shared two primary limitations or self-critiques of this work. The first pertains to an acknowledgement that this body of work does not delve into how Black women can utilize their practices to effect specific changes in education policy. Rather, it concentrates on identifying areas of access and opportunity for alternative education models and beyond. The second recognizes that this approach adopts a both/and perspective that advocates for both education policy reform and the creation of alternative structures. It upholds an abolitionist framework as the ultimate objective for promoting equitable educational outcomes while highlighting the importance of crucial reforms throughout the process.

Key Arguments and Field Contributions

There were some key arguments that I made throughout this dissertation that connect to the field contributions both in the academy and in the policy world, more broadly. The first, education policy must be contextual and rooted in the assets of educational practices in the community's most harm and historically disproportionately impacted, particularly those led by black women. Second, Black women should take up more policy entrepreneurial roles. Although we don't see a direct pipeline here, I think that there is an access opportunity for us to take up more policy entrepreneurial roles to influence policy on behalf of an in coordination with communities and grassroots organization for the greater good of the people. Three, there's something unique about the collective political and material struggle of Black people globally — women and men alike — but particularly in the United States that really make us well positioned and strategically qualify based on our lived experiences to examine, deconstruct, and reimagine policy that could enhance our life chances in everyday lives. The fourth is Black women, based on our collective marginalized identities of being Black and women, navigate and negotiate policy relevant priorities in alignment with the expertise of our lived experiences to strategically advance an agenda toward liberation of all people. Last but not least, there's so much that impacts education outside of schools and classrooms that we have to yet to fully understand

and strategically leverage to advance policy-relevant educational outcomes so for me, education policy includes these community concerns, programs and practices as well.

Policy Implications

The unconventional ways in which Black women promoted the use of education to accomplish key goals and engage their target demographics have implications for education policy, as it is a key driver of local progress. This research found that community-centered education models, led by Black women in Chicago, were a powerful tool for creating and stimulating systemic change therefore there are potentially long-term and statewide benefits of investment and model scale up. Given this study's implications for education policy, my suggested policy recommendations include: (1) increasing funding and resources for community-centered education programs developed by Black women; (2) developing policies that recognize the value of Black women in leading educational reform and including the full participation of Black women in the policy process; and (3) promoting systemic change via the prioritization of racial and educational equity.

Overall, this research emphasizes the need for greater support for Black women-led initiatives and their inclusion in decision-making processes in education policy. Furthermore, it highlights the important contributions that Black women make to their organizations and communities through their leadership, which is grounded in their experiences as Black women, deep love for their people, and their commitment to freedom and liberation via racial equity, social justice, and systemic change.

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Appendix A. Community Workshop Intensive Syllabus

Bronzeville Community Workshop Intensive Course Syllabus (12 hours)

Email: info@blackresearcherscollective.com
Workshop Instructor: Glenance Green, Co-Founder & Executive Director, Black Researchers Collective

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Course Overview

The purpose of the Community Workshop Intensive initiative is to train communities with research tools that they can use. During the Bronzeville Community Workshop Intensive, participants (i.e., parents, organizers, grassroot leaders, and advocates) will learn how to identify and take a policy-relevant issue from ideation to a plan of action, using research tools as a capacity-building strategy to effect change within their community over the course of three (3) days in December.

Course Schedule

This workshop consists of three sessions and a total of 12 hours. The following sessions will take place in person during the dates and times below **at The Bronzeville Incubator** located at **5055 S Prairie Ave, Chicago, IL 60615.**

- Saturday, December 4, 2021 - 11:00a - 4:00p (Lunch provided)
- Saturday, December 11, 2021 - 11:00a - 4:00p (Lunch provided)
- Wednesday, December 15, 2021 - 6:00 - 8:00p (Snacks provided)

Prerequisites

- Participants must live and/or work in the greater community of Bronzeville
- Participants must be committed to the improvement of Black lives and Black communities

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Course Materials

- You will need to bring your personal laptop or tablet and charger to each session.
- You will need access to a Google Suite of tools such as Google Docs, Google Forms, Google Sheets, and Google Drive. If you have a GMAIL account, you most likely have access to these tools. If not, we're happy to provide support accessing this free service.

- Composition books and pens will be provided to each attendee and stored by Black Researchers Collective for safekeeping between sessions.

Course Content and Anticipated Outcomes

By the end of the **three (3) part** workshop, participants will achieve the following:

- Develop an individual or group action plan
- Build and/or enhance their local community awareness of research tools and practices
- Obtain practical research skills that can be used to advance their personal and professional work
- Increase their readiness for civic activation and engagement
- Increase their knowledge of policy-relevant issues

Below are a list of activities that we will accomplish together over the course of the workshops. As the course evolves, the activities are subject to change based on the collective progress of the group.

Week One Activities: 12/4

- 11:00a - 1:00p
  - Consent and media release forms
  - Welcome from the Black Researchers Collective and The Bronzeville Incubator
    - Land Acknowledgment
  - About the Black Researchers Collective and Bronzeville Community Workshop Intensive
  - Group introductions and icebreaker
  - Course syllabus review
  - Community Agreements
  - History of Bronzeville
  - Community reflections and conversation
    - Word bubble: What comes to mind when you think of research?
    - Writing prompt: What do you know about research?
    - Conversation: How have you or someone you know been helped or harmed by research?
- 1:00 - 1:30p
  - Community lunch and voluntary interviews
- 1:30 - 3:30p
  - Research 101
    - What is it? Why is it important?
    - Power/knowledge
    - Research ethics and what constitutes “bad” research
    - Doing decolonizing research
    - Causation versus correlation
  - Using research tools to identify policy challenges

    - Project ideation (groups of three)
        - Brainstorming issues important to you
        - Developing research questions that might help us better understand the issue
            - Testing your research question among peers
- 3:30 – 3:40p
    - Breathe and stretch
- 3:40 - 4:00p
    - Community reflections: What did you learn about research today that you didn't previously know?
    - Post workshop survey
    - Post session group tasks
    - Expectations for workshop two

Week Two Activities: 12/11

- 11:00a - 1:00p
    - Brief recap of last workshop
    - Project progress check-in
    - Community reflections
    - Research 102
        - Research approaches and techniques
        - Research design
        - Publicly available resources and research tools at our disposal
        - Using Google and other search engines appropriately to learn more about the issue
    - Project design
        - Application of Research 102
- 1:00 - 1:30p
    - Community lunch and voluntary interviews
- 1:30 - 3:30p
    - Research 103
        - Data collection
        - Data analysis
        - Reporting and plan of action
- 3:30 – 3:40p
    - Breathe and stretch
- 3:30 - 4:00p
    - Community reflections: How can what you've learned today be applied in your everyday life?
    - Post workshop survey

Week Three Activities: 12/15

- 6:00 - 6:30p
    - Questions and final project prep
- 6:30 - 7:30p
    - Presentation of group projects and plans of action
    - Community discussions on how we can support one another in carrying out plans
- 7:30 – 7:40p

    - Breathe and stretch
- 7:40 - 8:00p
    - Final community reflections
    - Post workshop survey
    - Next steps: post workshop expectations
        - Three month follow ups

Participant Expectations and Requirements

Participants must attend all three sessions and show up on time to not delay the process.

The success of any course is dependent on active and full participation by each course member. It can equally be said that the success of an individual course member is dependent on the individual's active and full engagement with their peers, instructor, and course content. The success of this course is no different. The extent of every attendee's engagement and participant will determine how we work toward achieving the course outcomes together.

Additionally, at the Black Researchers Collective, we honor and respect everyone's opinions, perspectives, and lived experiences regardless of their age, level of education, or prior experience with research. Anyone entering our communal space must also do the same.

Incentives

At the end of the third workshop, participants will receive a **$300 gift card** as a thank you **for their participation <u>in all three (3) workshops</u>**. If, for any reason, a participant does not attend all three (3) workshops or fails to complete all 12 hours of the program, they will not be eligible to receive the benefit of the full incentive.

Documentary filmmaking

The Black Researchers Collective will be filming in the space for the duration of each workshop for the purpose of understanding how to improve our community engagement and facilitation process. In addition, documentary content will be used as a data source in partial fulfillment of the primary instructor's dissertation requirements at the University of Illinois at Chicago. **By entering the space, you are agreeing to be filmed and your likeness to be used for educational and academic purposes**. Consent and media release forms will be provided to every participant.

Participants will have an option to be voluntarily interviewed throughout the sessions to share their experiences in the course. You have the option to decline to participate in the interview without penalty. For those interested in being interviewed, we will provide you more information at each session.

Appendix B. Community Workshop Intensive 90-Day Checklist

Community Workshop Intensive
90-Day Checklist

The purpose of this document is to serve as a 90-day roadmap for things to do between the end of the community workshop intensive and the 90- day check-in.

Within the first 30-days, consider:

- Understanding the Problem + Tightening up the Plan of Action (see template below)
    - Developing group meeting schedule (ex: once a month; or once every two weeks)
        - Once solidified send calendar invite for reminders
    - Conducting a Landscape Review: Research the social and political infrastructure of your community
        - Who is currently doing the work?
    - Revamping the plan to accommodate your findings and what you've learned from the landscape review
    - Put together a clear timeline with task and role assignments to support with project management and execution

Within the first 60-days, consider:

- Develop Implementation Strategy for Action
    - Determine the end goal
        - What is the purpose? What is the thing that you seek to accomplish? What is the problem that you seek to solve?
    - Reach out to folks who are doing the work
        - Schedule 15-30 min virtual/phone check-in or 1 hour in-person meeting
        - Understand what has been done and how they're doing it
    - Determine what success looks like
        - Develop metrics
    - How will the strategy be executed?

        - What are the community benefits? Risks?

Within the first 90-days, consider:

- Develop Main Goals and Priorities
    - Power mapping activity - Example
        - Determine if reaching out to elected officials is appropriate for the work
    - Begin strategy implementation
        - Check progress against success metrics
    - Build communication strategies for community
    - Have 90-day check-in with Black Researchers Collective staff

Example Document Here

Reference: Plan of Action - Template

- Identify a research problem or community gap in need of fulfillment from your personal and/or professional expertise as a member of your community seeking self-determination
- Determine a central research question and set of subquestions
- Determine at least one qualitative or quantitative technique for data collection
    - Hint: How will you go about answering your research question?
- Identify strategies for data collection
    - How will you go about getting what you need?
- Identify a process for data analysis and articulating key findings
- Start building a process of goal setting and stakeholder involvement
    - What are the goals of this project?
    - Who needs to be involved to accomplish those goals?

CURRICULUM VITAE

Glenance LaVerne Green, Ph.D.

https://www.linkedin.com/in/glenancegreen

FORMAL EDUCATION

2023 **Doctor of Philosophy, Policy Studies in Urban Education**
University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

2021 **Measurement, Evaluation, Statistics, and Assessment (MESA) Certificate**
University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

2012 **Master of Arts Degree, Sociology**
Graduated Summa Cum Laude with the highest honors
DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois

2009 **Bachelor of Arts Degree, Sociology**
Graduated Cum Laude
Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
Minor(s) include: Political Science, Urban Studies, and Black World Studies

CURRENT RESEARCH

2020 – 2023 **Research Foçi:** Black Women, Education Policy, Black Liberation, Political Economy, Racial Equity
Dissertation: City of Black Women's Shoulders: Examining Policy-Relevant Educational Efforts for Liberation in Chicago
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Nicole Nguyen
Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
Abstract: This study examines how Black women leading Black-led organizations (BLOs) work toward Black liberation, and the characteristics or attributes that exist across BLOs led by Black women. It explores how Black women lead and whether the approaches they are using to help us get free leverage similar strategies, independent of one another. I argue that education policy must be contextual and rooted in the assets and educational practices of the communities most harmed and historically disproportionately impacted, particularly those led by Black women. I also argue that, based on our collective marginalized identities of being Black and woman, we negotiate and navigate policy-relevant priorities in alignment with the expertise of our lived experiences to strategically advance an agenda toward the liberation of all people. I leverage Black Feminist Thought and radical Black feminism as the overarching theoretical frameworks to autoethnographically tell this story through the lens and work of the Black Researchers Collective, a grassroots community-based organization on the south side of Chicago training and equipping communities with research tools to be more civically engaged and policy informed. This study includes the collection and analysis of program workshop applicant data (*n*=155), 129 participant workshop surveys (*n*=43), 200 participant workshop journals (*n*=50), post-program workshop interviews (*n*=7), Board meeting observations (*n*=10), and interviews with Black women working within (*n*=8) and external to (*n*=16) the Black Researchers Collective. Study findings indicate that Black women are resisting through education. Black women across the south and west sides of Chicago are developing, curating, and employing various education models in community as a key mechanism to collectively resist systems of oppression and collectively help us get free. Black women are using varied educational techniques and strategies to carry out and amplify their organization's mission and values; the successful outcomes of which suggest possible implications for education policy on a state and local level.

RESEARCH AND ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

2022 – Present ***Co-Host of Research in the Streets Podcast***
Black Researchers Collective, Chicago, Illinois

2020 – ***Mayoral Appointed Councilmember***
Present Advisory Council on Equity, City of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

2019 – ***Co-Founder and Executive Director***
Present Black Researchers Collective, Chicago, Illinois

2018 – ***Deputy Director***
2020 Free Spirit Media, Chicago, Illinois

2019 – ***NLC Chicago Fellow***
2020 New Leaders Council, Chicago, Illinois

2019 ***Co-Host of IL Informed Podcast***
State Matters, Chicago, Illinois

2018 – ***Racial Equity Fellow***
2019 Chicago United for Equity, Chicago, Illinois

2016 – ***Researcher***
2018 American Institutes for Research, Chicago, Illinois

2013 – ***Research Associate***
2016 American Institutes for Research, Chicago, Illinois

2012 – ***Adjunct Instructor***
2015 College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois

2011 – ***Research Assistant***
2013 Social Science Research Center, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois

2008 – ***Equipment Manager & Election Judge***
2013 Cook County Board of Elections, Chicago, Illinois

2012 ***Graduate Teaching Assistant***
Inside-Out Restorative Justice Prison Exchange Program via DePaul University
Stateville Correctional Center, Joliet, Illinois

2012 ***Research Assistant***
Black/Inside Exhibition: A History of Captivity & Confinement in the U.S., Project NIA, Chicago, Illinois

2011 ***Nan McKay & Associates Operations Team Intern***
Housing Choice Voucher Program, Chicago Housing Authority, Chicago, Illinois

2010 – ***Leadership Scholars Program Graduate Assistant***
2011 Student Leadership Institute, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois

2009 – ***Communications Specialist & Volunteer Coordinator***
2010 AmeriCorps Public Allies Chicago, SisterHouse, Chicago, Illinois

2009 ***Law Clerk Intern, Domestic Violence Division***
Cook County State's Attorney's Office, Chicago, Illinois

2007 – ***Provost Fellow***
2009 Loyola Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (LUROP)
Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

2008 ***Research Fellow***
National Public Housing Museum Proposal at 1322 West Taylor
Center for Urban Research and Learning, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Green, G. (2016). Shades of Green. Chicago, IL.

Green, G., Woodson, T., Bello, T., & Runner, S. (2023). Understanding Identity Crimes in Black Communities Interim Report: Final Phase One Deliverable. Chicago, IL.

Hallberg, K. & Green, G. (2015). How Can We Hire and Keep High-Quality Teachers in Struggling Schools? [Blog post]. The Policy Center at AIR. Retrieved from http://www.air.org/resource/how-can-we-hire-and-keep-high-quality-teachers-struggling-schools.

Illinois Department of Human Rights. (2016). Illinois Scorecard on Discrimination: Identifying Best Practices to Promote Diversity and Inclusion. Interim Report to the Governor. Chicago, IL.

Scott, G., & Garner, R. (2012). Doing Qualitative Research: Designs, Methods, and Techniques. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Education (Instructor's Manual and Test Bank Tool)

Tozer, S., Walker, L., & Green, G. (2017). Why Continuous Improvement Briefs. Center for Urban Education Leadership. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois at Chicago.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

2023 Identity, Authentication, and the Road Ahead: A Cybersecurity Forum
"Spotlight Session: Identity, The Individual, and Inclusion"
Washington, DC

2022 Race Forward Presents Facing Race: A National Conference
"Decolonizing Research Practices"
Phoenix, Arizona

2022 American Educational Studies Association: Annual Conference
"Three Tardy Passes, You Get Detention: Examining Carcerality in School-Based Restorative Justice Practices"
Pittsburg, Pennsylvania

2022 Year of Healing Summit
"Decolonizing Research"
Chicago, Illinois

2012 Diversifying Higher Education Faculty in Illinois Program (DFI) / Illinois African American and Latino Higher Education Alliance (IALHEA) Conference and Diversity Research Forum
"The Criminalization of Youth of Color: Racial Composition as a Predictor of School Punitiveness"
Chicago, Illinois

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS AND MEMBERSHIPS

Economic Development Committee Chair, Grand Boulevard Advisory Council (2022 – Present)
Block Club President (2021 – Present)
Board Member, Kuumba Lynx (2018 – Present)
Youth Engagement Committee Chair, Ellis Park Advisory Council (2018 – 2022)
Member & Presenter, American Educational Studies Association (2022)
Member, American Educational Research Association (2015)

Grad Delegate for the School Sisters of Notre Dame, United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (2011)
Member & Presenter, American Sociological Association (2008– 2009)

AWARDS

Field Leader: Promoting Racial Equity Through Art, The Field Foundation (2019)
Diversifying Higher Education Faculty in Illinois Fellowship, Illinois Board of Higher Education (2011; 2020 - 2023)
Richard M. Blount Spirit Award, AmeriCorps Public Allies Chicago (2010)