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WEAPONS OF MASS CONSTRUCTION: LIBERATION PRESCIENCE AS A PRAXIS OF
FREEDOM

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For those who demand the better futures they know are possible.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	v
List of Tables	vi
Acknowledgments	vii
Abstract	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review	32
Chapter 3: Theoretical Foundations of Liberation Prescience as Praxis	61
Chapter 4: Architects of Freedom: Understanding Perceptions of Futurity and Behavior	90
Appendix 4A: Recruitment Materials	137
Appendix 4B: Interview Guide	139
Appendix 4C: Focus Group Guide	141
Appendix 4D: Axial Coding Schema	143
Appendix 4E: Community Agreements	144
Chapter 5: Conclusion	145
Bibliography	154

List of Figures

Figure 1: Pillars of Liberation Prescience Amongst This Study's Population	112
Figure 2: Recruitment Materials	137
Figure 3: Interview Guide	139
Figure 4: Focus Group Guide	141
Figure 5: Community Agreements	144

List of Tables

Table 1: Frequency of Open Code Responses	108
Table 2: Formation of Thematic Codes	110
Table 3: Axial Coding Schema	143

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Abstract

This dissertation is, ultimately, concerned with questions of liberation, freedom, and futurity. In particular, it is motivated by the understanding that we as social scientists cannot fully or adeptly understand why people navigate the political arena in the ways that they do without first having a more robust understanding of how and what they think about liberation and futurity. This is further rooted in the idea that if the inextricable virulence of systems of domination causes certain groups to endure precarious life experiences that leave them on the margins of society, it must then follow that these communities are forced to assemble their path to liberation in remarkably novel ways. They are forced to “think otherwise” about what it means to get and be free. As such, this project takes seriously the political commitments of young Black activists and organizers, who identify as women and gender expansive, and intentionally poses them as architects of freedom engaged in a project of thinking otherwise.

The animating phrase that breathes life into this project is “we do this ‘til we free us”, which is a phrase commonly heard in spaces of social movement activity. This dissertation is taken up with the task of understanding the “this” in we do this ‘til we free us. When these organizers, political navigators, and imagineers make that statement, what are they referring to? In probing this inquisition, I ask: how do young Black women and gender expansive activists think about achieving political equity, freedom, and liberation? How do they decide to engage in, navigate, and traverse the political realm in pursuit of better futures? In other words, I aim to understand how they seek to bring about better conditions through political action.

In exploring this question, I offer what I have called “liberation prescience”, which I posit is an ontological and epistemological praxis of freedom that can be described as the practice of acting in the present based upon the (better) future that you yearn for. In other words, I seek to understand the process of taking advantage of a political past and present in order to leverage a future in which one can experience true freedom.

I conduct 25 interviews and 2 focus groups (of 10 participants each). I chose these methods as I believe that both individual and collective insights are quintessential for understanding projects of liberation. I find that amongst this group, liberation prescience manifests in three main elements, embodiment and practice, community and collectivity, and self-actualization.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

*"...this idea of something that guides us through darkness to bring us to another moment of light, I thought was very powerful. Of course, I'm working from a multireligious kind of understanding, so whether it's human spirit, ancestral spirit, the Holy Spirit or a spirit of optimism, **there's something that carries us to another moment of light during dark times.**"*

- Eric Lewis Williams

The intricate web of human actions and decisions within the political realm, better known as political behavior, has engendered a set of inquiries into the political lives of various groups of people. There exists a range of literature that seeks to explain if, how, and why people politically engage in the ways that they do. As these analyses have been indispensable for our understanding of the relationships that exist between people (individuals and groups) and political systems, it serves as a site for excavating aspects of both social cohesion and contention. Political contention — struggles and conflicts of those vying for something — has led to the posing of questions about how people mobilize for power, influence, and freedom. These questions figure prominently within Black politics, where the complex relationship between power dynamics — such as race, gender, and class — and politics complicates the factors that inform political engagement, especially as it pertains to acts of resistance. There is no shortage of scholarly work that explores Black political behavior or political attitudes about freedom. However, the investigation of the relationship and tensions that exist between the two are lacking. This chasm raises questions about political scientists' ability to exhaustively elucidate the political behavior and commitments of Black people, especially as political conditions fluctuate. This is increasingly true as a different set of actors — young Black women and gender expansive folks — are increasingly taking

helm of social movement activity.¹ I use the term “gender expansive” within this project to describe folks who lie outside of cisgender, binary, or heteronormative gender identities. This includes, but is not limited to, folks who identify as non-binary, gender non-conforming, or genderflux. When I mention Black women, this includes cisgender and trans women. Taken together, I seek to deeply engage with young, Black activists and organizers who identify as women or gender-expansive. As these young organizers continue to emerge as leaders and influencers of contemporary social movement activity, political scientists must remain attuned to the mechanisms through which they navigate and think about the political sphere. I argue that how people think about freedom and liberation informs their political decision making. As such, we must first understand how they think about freedom before we can understand how and why they make political decisions. This project poses young Black women and gender expansive activists and organizers as *architects of freedom* in an attempt to more fully understand how and why they might be in pursuit of political conditions that are at odds with what they are currently experiencing. If there exists the “problem of the powerless” what, then, do these activists and organizers proffer us as answers to said problem?²

In this dissertation, I seek to understand the process of taking advantage of the political past and present in order to leverage a future in which one can experience true freedom as I ask: how do young Black women and gender expansive activists think about achieving political equity, freedom, and liberation?³ How do they decide to engage in, navigate, and traverse the political realm in pursuit

¹ Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the 21st Century* (University of California Press, 2018).

² James Q. Wilson, “The Strategy of Protest: Problems of Negro Civic Action” (Journal of Conflict Resolution, 1961).

³ Here, I am defining an activists and organizers as any individual that engages in direct action or resistance against a more powerful actor or authority.

of better futures? In other words, I aim to understand how they seek to bring about better conditions through political action. Further, this project stands as a quest to understand how Black gender expansive folks and women activists of the Trayvon Generation politically engage otherwise.⁴ I pinpoint Black women and gender expansive folx as the population of interest as I believe that multiply marginalized people who grew up within the past 25 years have particular orientations towards politics and freedom due to various unique characteristics of the generation that are made even more salient by the centrality of the internet and social media.⁵ Though this is, of course, not the only group that utilizes social media, I believe that this group — that were born before widespread use of the internet — have been particularly influenced by the hypervisibility of the innate anti-Blackness within and throughout U.S. institutions. In fact, when asked about their moment of politicization, a research participant stated:

“I remember exactly where I was when I heard the news about Trayvon. I grew up in a small, white, Conservative town in the South. So even though I was already extremely aware of my Blackness, I think that moment in time made me particularly aware of the issues with my Blackness because I realized that I was not just different. I was a danger. I knew I had to navigate the world differently and, more importantly, I knew I needed to do something. I didn’t know what. But something. Anything. My view of the world changed that day.”

While exploring these questions, I offer the framework of liberation prescience, which I posit is an ontological praxis of liberation that can be described as the practice of acting in the present based upon the (better) future that you yearn for. In essence, liberation prescience is what I have termed the process of politically navigating the present with one’s sight set on more ideal conditions. This

⁴ By “otherwise”, I am referring to how folks might engage in politics in ways that are not traditionally considered “political”.

⁵ As the letter x has become an orthographic symbol for gender neutrality, I used “folx” in place of “folks” throughout this dissertation as a gender neutral term to refer to all people across the gender spectrum.

aspirational and epistemological praxis follows in the legacy of Afrofuturism, as it utilizes historically informed repertoires of political action in order to craft new conditions of the present and future.

Liberation prescience is, at its core, a radical process of “thinking otherwise”.

This project of thinking otherwise is capacious as it encompasses yearnings for a wide range of political and social conditions. It is for this reason that I categorize liberation prescience as ontological in that it is concerned with understanding and challenging what “is” in the political sphere. For those who seek a release from political subjection and a welcoming to the experience of freedom, analyzing the nature of their past, present, and future becomes an indispensable tool. Further, an acknowledgment of the interconnected nature of various social identities in tandem with an understanding of how these intersect to shape individuals’ experiences is necessary for challenging and reshaping traditional political paradigms. More pointedly, as young Black women and GX folx might be able to locate a collective history and set of knowledge, it is not the case that they deploy these sets of information in the same ways.⁶ In other words, their knowledge of the past does not necessarily awaken in them the same visions of the future. It is for this reason that this project seeks to understand the points of similarity *and* dissimilarity that exist within their freedom dreams. As these varying hopes for the future carry implications for political systems, political scientists must interrogate where the points of convergence — cornerstones, if you will — emerge and what they mean for political decision-making. As a way through and out of inequitable conditions, political resistance, as understood here, is anchored in the audacity to strive for things that some might shrug off as frivolous

⁶ I will use gender expansive and GX interchangeably throughout this project. I use “folx” as a gender-neutral alternative to “folks”.

or impossible. After all, this present moment was once someone's future. As it follows, we are currently experiencing conditions that some once hoped and mobilized for. Today's organizers, then, are seeing things that people from the past once imagined. With that in mind, this project uncovers how today's organizers are moving in order to ensure that those in the future will see what they are now imagining. This inextricable connection between past, present, and future carries significant implications for the study of political behavior as patterns of looking to the past in order to build new futures informs the political deliberation of a group of people whose actions carry the potential to shape political realities. I argue, then, that how this group of people thinks about freedom is informed, in part, by who they are, who they have been, and who they yearn to be. It is in this way that people's thoughts about futurity impact how they move in the present.

I argue, herein, that the precarious social positionality of young Black women and GX activists and organizers endows them with liberation prescience, a way to *know* that other worlds are possible.⁷ Of the worlds that these individuals imagine, not all of them would look vastly different from our current world, but some might. The bottom line is that folx who are invested in social movement activity have discerned, via liberation prescience, that different realities could be possible. As such, when Black folx say “we been knew that”, they are not referring to what some may repudiate as a make-believe, crystal ball magic. Rather, this *knowing* is so deeply rooted in a historical — and simultaneously contemporary — reality that it allows those who possess it to exhale a seemingly magical air. In this way, liberation prescience is a precognitive praxis whereby one engages in the

⁷ I will discuss later that not all participants of this study believe that their ideal worlds will come to fruition. However, they do believe that just the possibility of better worlds is worth fighting for.

practice of acting in the present based on a future that they want to bring into reality. These actions are galvanized by the belief that “there is still more” and expels a yearning to go and get it. This is evidenced by a statement from a focus group participant who said, “Sometimes I struggle with whether or not I should be considered an activist. All I know is that there just has to be something more out there. The way that I live life and the way that we are forced to exist in certain ways...this can’t be it”. Important to note here is that liberation prescience is not simply about escapism or apparating elsewhere. Rather, it is an epistemology and politic that is made and remade through the historical necessity to challenge what has commonly been accepted as given within society. In other words, it is to “think otherwise” about the world which, to be literal, is about the undertaking of making new realities in the throes of a world that says it is not possible. It constructs a break from the dualities of the world. It shows what is possible when folx ask again and again: what is knowledge, what is power, and what is truth? What could a world unencumbered by legacies of oppression and political suppression look like? Liberation prescience is the ability to craft a map that leads to marginalized folks finally experiencing freedom and being able to proclaim, “I saw things I imagined”.⁸ I posit that this mobilization towards true freedom may be what young Black activists mean about when they say, “we do this ‘til we free us”, a phrase commonly heard in activist spaces. In fact, an interview participant noted, “I’ve seen the amazing things that Black people can do when we organize. We have a history of resistance and a history of doing what is needed to get something better. Our people can get what we want and need”. Liberation prescience, then, is not necessarily what propels someone to act, but it is about what they desire and

⁸ Solange, “Things I Imagined.” *When I Get Home*, (Columbia Records, 2019) Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0jF4xsiVd8AQoIEUmn7KLt?si=c2cfaf14c667466b>.

how they pursue it. It is about the relationship between how people think about futurity in concurrence with the reality of their present.

Statement of the Problem

The inextricable virulence of systems of domination cause certain groups to endure precarious life experiences that leave them on the margins of society. I argue that, as a result, marginalized communities are forced to assemble their path to liberation in remarkably novel ways as they maneuver varied access to political resources. These paths must meander between and beyond multiple layers of tension which exist, in this case, as a consequence of their marginality. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley asks in his book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Tradition*, “What are today’s young activists dreaming about? We know what they are fighting against, but what are they fighting for?”.⁹ He posits further, “Without new visions, we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down”.¹⁰ This project explores the “new visions” of these young folks on the margins. As they serve as chief architects of Black futures in their struggle towards freedom, there is an obligation to imagine beyond the now. Afterall, “nothing happens in the real world unless it first happens in the images in our heads”.¹¹ These images in their heads — their imaginations — are where the bounds of reality are expanded through the use of the ontological epistemology of liberation prescience. Zion, an interview participant from Chicago, shared, “It’s funny ‘cause sometimes I forget that the outside world doesn’t look the way it does in my brain. Like...the connections, and community, and society that I think about are things that I have made sort of real. I just like...I don’t know...I wanted to live a certain way, so I surrounded myself

⁹ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

with people that could make that possible”. These modes of knowing are tools of construction and mechanisms of worldbuilding. If institutions, norms, and values of a society are consolidations of a collective consciousness, then a radical imagination must be the building block for a world where Black folx can, in fact, claim “we gon’ be alright”.¹²

These radical imaginations explored within liberation prescience, I posit, find their roots in the vast history of the Black Radical Tradition. As understood by Cedric J. Robinson, The Black Radical Tradition is “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality”.¹³ When writing about this tradition further in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Robinson states:

“The Black Radical Tradition was an accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle. In the daily encounters and petty resistance to domination, slaves had acquired a sense of the calculus of oppression as well as its organization and instrumentation. These experiences lent themselves to a means of preparation for more epic resistance movements”.¹⁴

I read this and take pause at the idea that across space, place, and time, many Black people throughout the diaspora have always possessed an otherworldly imagination that established the practice of thinking otherwise. The history of domination that has come to be understood as the “unholy trinity of capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy” has forced Black people into the margins of society and “othered” them in such a way that has generated a collective desire to challenge the hierarchical and

¹² Kendrick Lamar, “Alright.” *To Pimp a Butterfly*, (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015) Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/track/3iVcZ5G6tvkXZkZKlMpIU?si=a2948111a6d44a15>.

¹³ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

¹⁴ Ibid.

oppressive status quo.¹⁵ This collective desire is rife with practices of dissent and resistance, many of which were and are born out of the Black Radical Imagination. In other words, the Black Radical Imagination is situated within the Black Radical Tradition in such a way that makes possible a way of working beyond the now and towards futurity. This extensive creation of ideologies, tactics, and strategies of resistance and imagination, that were born out of a history of collective Black struggle, link the political histories of Black people as intergenerational, interdimensional, and temporally malleable. The building of this political repertoire certainly continues today, in a time when Black people — especially those who have been subject to secondary marginalization — are still imagining and reimagining what it means to experience freedom.¹⁶ As Black people continue to be politically othered and relegated as disposable, how do they traverse their realities in search of new ones?

In this project, I have uncovered answers to the question of how young Black women and gender expansive activists of the Trayvon Generation think about pursuing political equality, freedom, and liberation while pursuing better worlds. The research objectives are as follows: 1) introduce liberation prescience as an epistemological praxis of freedom 2) better understand young Black women and gender expansive folks as architects of freedom and 3) be able to lend more explanatory power to the political behavior of these young Black people in movement. In order to fulfill these objectives, I've offered liberation prescience, which I posit is an epistemological and ontological ideology of freedom that uncovers the spectrum of political behavior that those in movement might engage in with the understanding that their freedom must be made. As this project brings forth a new understanding of

¹⁵ Nadia E. Brown and Lisa Young, "Ratchet Politics: Moving Beyond Black Women's Bodies to Indict Institutions and Structures" (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

the relationship between aspirations of freedom and political behavior, it makes a significant contribution to the fields of Black politics, political behavior, and social movement theory.

This study is rooted in an afrofuturist perspective. By this, I mean to say that in order to understand how this group navigates current political conditions in intentional pursuits of new ones, this project recognizes that speculative action and theory are often used to imagine alternate realities. On a macro level, the stake here lies within an understanding of how young Black women and gender expansive activists and organizers view the relationship between the current political arena and which parts of it, if any, are conducive to their visions of liberation. Tai, a 32 year old from the Bay Area, stated, “I think when people talk about getting free, they mean all kinds of things. A lot of us are mobilizing around the same values, I guess, but we don’t all necessarily want the same thing. I mean...we do all want to be free but, um, it...it just isn’t realistic that it looks the same for all of us”. As such, I remain attentive to the web of epistemologies that exist when young Black people in movement say “this is how we get free”, which is commonly proclaimed amongst participants of social movement activity.

I. Research Question & Objectives

Many traditional studies within the political behavior literature yield analyses that often paint too flat of a picture of political life.¹⁷ As a basic example, take a study that seeks to explain past or present behavior. The questions explored often take some form of “did x participate or not?”. Though useful for understanding some level of political action amongst groups and individuals, these

¹⁷ Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).; Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960).; John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

dichotomous findings are insufficient. Works that have been upheld as traditional within the field tend to focus on particular sets of actions or particular groups — these groups are typically not those who are multiply marginalized.¹⁸ A more full understanding of political life appreciates the fact that the ways in which folks engage — and disengage — exist on a multidimensional plane. This means, more clearly, that political action simply cannot be understood on a unidirectional axis. These modes of engagement are often defined by a group’s social precarity and life experiences. Therefore, this project sought to bring forth the nuances of political participation that are often overlooked and to characterize a broader set of actions as political as these behaviors impact and are impacted by political systems in a way that can stand to shape the broader dynamics of society. I explored a spectrum of modes from “traditional” (e.g. voting) to “non-traditional” (e.g. riots) forms of political participation. From this study, I contribute an analysis of young Black women and GX folks as architects of freedom through understanding their political participation via the ontological praxis of liberation prescience.

The closest concept that we have currently to understand similar processes of engagement is that of prefigurative politics. Prefigurative politics, as coined by Carl Boggs in 1977, “is to embody within the ongoing political practice of a movement [...] those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal”. In other words, Boggs argues that today’s social movement is formed in a way that is meant to bring about one’s utopia. Boggs names “prefiguratism” as the practice of enacting prefigurative politics. Writing in the 1970’s, he used this concept to write about insurgent movements taking place in the US, Spain, Russia, and

¹⁸ V. O. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961).; Dennis Chong, James N. Druckman, “A Theory of Framing and Opinion Formation in Competitive Elite Environments” (Annual Review of Political Science, 2007).

Italy.¹⁹ In sum, Boggs wrote about prefigurative politics as dependent on participatory democracy and the creation of political forms that “prefigured” the desired society of the active group.²⁰ One case that Boggs applied this concept to was Occupy Wall Street. Feminist theorist Sheila Rowbotham later applied this concept to the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.²¹ However, prefigurative politics has not been — and, arguably, cannot be — used to describe movements that are built and led by folks who are marginalized in multiplicitous ways. While prefigurative politics does shed light on the ways that particular movements seek to move away from “politics as usual”, it does not attend to the ways that Black women and GX folks are trying to navigate to new worlds while simultaneously reckoning with their current political status.²² Further, prefigurative politics has been used to characterize the actions of groups participating in social movements. It is not illustrative of the political thoughts and actions of individuals or of those who are engaging politically in modes that might exist outside of a defined social movement.

Though there are some commonalities amongst the visions of the dreamers this dissertation focuses on, there also exists factors that might make it strenuous to find intra-group alignment. This was expressed by several participants, one which stated, “It is very frustrating to have to confront the fact that despite how collective this is, we don’t all agree. It is very easy to get lost in that sometimes. It’s important to understand where we might need to work on alignment but...it’s just...frustrating”.

¹⁹ Carl Boggs, “Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy, and the Dilemma of Power” (Theory and Society, 1977).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal, and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (London: Merlin Press, 1979).

²² This reckoning I am referencing refers to the difficulties individuals may encounter while seeking to find alignment amongst one another, and perhaps even individually, when deciding *which* new world should be brought to fruition and how.

Again, liberation prescience hinges strongly on the malleability of one's imagination. This, I believe, is due to the fact that experiencing freedom looks and feels different for people, especially as they navigate through life. To rigidly prefigure a world for marginalized people would be to bring about another world rife with inequity that is ill equipped to adapt to the omnifarious nature of Black existence. When speaking how she sees future worlds for her loved ones, Laila, an organizer from St. Louis, shared, "When I really think about it, it would be kinda weird for me to define an entire world. I don't think I have the ability to decide that for other people. I guess I am trying to say that it feels lowkey oppressive for me, alone, to decide what other people's future should look like". Conversely, to adumbrate a world for marginalized people would be to outline social cornerstones or pillars that are conducive to a world that is more adequately furnished to support unfettered liberation — this is the sort of work I believe young Black women and GX activists and organizers to be invested in. This study fills a particular gap as prefigurative politics has remained largely inapplicable to Black politics due to its predominant focus on one system — as opposed to the multiplex — of power. Examples include the economic focus of the Occupy movement or the patriarchal fixation of the women's movement. This offering of liberation prescience, in turn, is positioned to demystify the thoughts and actions of these movement actors who take critically the fact that systems of oppression are simultaneous and inextricable. This is not a project that seeks to answer whether someone will show up to the polls *or* protest in the streets. Rather, it is a study about why some marginalized Black folks take part in one, both, and so much more and surveys how their thoughts about freedom figure into their political decision-making. At stake, then, lies an unabridged understanding of how these groups chart a political

solution to the “matrix of domination” through the use of imagination, political precognition, and worldbuilding.²³

Role of the Researcher

I come to this work as a Black, queer, transmasculine non-binary person. These are not just identities that I hold. Rather, they are my worldview. Queerness, in particular, defines my orientation to the world. I view queerness similarly to bell hooks when she stated, “Queer not as being about who you’re having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but ‘queer’ as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live”.²⁴ This orientation was formative in developing the research question and methodology of this project. I grew up in a religious military family in the Deep South. I navigated my childhood by *thinking otherwise* about what it meant to be a human in this world. While my character and existence were never fully accepted or understood by those around me, I developed my own ways of being and living. It was this carving of paths — that remain to this day — that awakened my desire to know and understand how others forge their own ways.

As a person of the Trayvon Generation, —more specifically, a Millennial — I myself have become all too familiar with the phrases “we do this ‘til we free us” and “how we get free”. I often say that I was politicized by Trayvon Martin, and radicalized by Black women. These political commitments not only shape my understanding of what it means to navigate this world while in pursuit of another, it also endows me with an insatiable desire to understand those who are doing the same. What does it

²³ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

²⁴ bell hooks, “Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body” (Panel, The New School, 2014).

mean to be “in movement”? What does it mean to engage in worldbuilding? What does it mean to collectively struggle towards liberation? These are the early questions from which this project materialized.

II. Quick Review of the Literature

This project is seated at the nexus of four major fields of literature. I turn to social movement theory, Black [feminist] politics, afrofuturism, and queer theory as analytical guideposts. In assembly with one another, these literatures highlight 1) the need, purpose, and scope of social movements 2) the use of Black feminist epistemologies within movement work 3) the use of Black creativity and imagination as a practice of freedom and 4) the deployment of Black Feminist praxes and queer theory within contemporary movements. These four lines of literature contribute the necessary historical and political context for discerning how Black folx — particularly those on the margins of the margins — understand, navigate, and challenge status quo politics. This brief review serves as a contextual and historical nest. Further, it is meant to identify key themes and concepts while making clear the roots of liberation prescience within this group of movement actors. The depths — and lacunae — of relevant fields will be explored more thoroughly within the literature review chapter.

Social Movements

Social movements and movement activity have been analyzed from a variety of perspectives and through many lenses. Social movement theory, simply put, examines the processes through which movements emerge, are formed, and are sustained — this includes micro- and macro-level analyses of individuals, groups, and organizations. Further, social movement theory provides a framework for analyzing the complex dynamics of social movements, including their origins, mobilization strategies,

internal dynamics, and impact on society. Many social movement scholars have contributed seminal works to the field that allow us to better understand the factors that shape collective action and social change.²⁵ Social movements have been defined as sustained, collective, and action-oriented challenges against a particular target (e.g. policies, institutions, elites, etc.) by a “less powerful” group that share a common purpose (e.g. racially-subjugated communities).²⁶ This group seeks to challenge and alter the status quo as they view their current situation to be unjust, unfavorable, or undesirable. Considering this marginal position, the group has an incentive to seek a different outcome. In other words, when groups find themselves situated too far from power or social influence, they often develop an incentive to rearrange the inequitable distribution of power. The use of “protest as a political resource” allows groups the opportunity to obtain influence or power in ways that they do not currently possess.²⁷ The attainment of influence in semblance with the use of a group’s indigenous resources — tools readily available to a group — are integral for challenges to be made.

These indigenous resources have been figured into what some have called “repertoires of contention”.²⁸ In the seminal text *Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758-1834*, political scientist and sociologist Charles Tilly notes that a repertoire:

“identifies a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice. Repertoires are learned cultural creations, but they do not descend

²⁵ Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).; Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (University of Chicago Press, 1982).; Charles Tilly, “Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758-1834,” (Social Science History, 1993).; Deva Woodly, *The Politics of Common Sense: How Social Movements Use Public Discourse to Change Politics and Win Acceptance* (Oxford University Press, 2015).; David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Jr., Steven K. Worden and Robert D. Benford, “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation” (American Sociological Review, 1986).

²⁶ Tilly, “Contentious Repertoires”

²⁷ Michael Lipsky, “Protest as a Political Resource” (American Political Science Review, 1968).

²⁸ Tilly, *Contentious Repertoires*.

from abstract philosophy or take shape as a result of political propaganda; they emerge from struggle. People learn to break windows in protest, attack pilloried prisoners, tear down dishonored houses, stage public marches, petition, hold formal meetings, organize special-interest associations”.²⁹

I think of repertoires here as weapons of mass construction, in that they are utilized in pursuit of building new futures. These historically and culturally informed repertoires are what I posit make up part of the political consciousness of marginalized folks. In particular, the precarious position of subjugated communities results in repertoires that become blueprints for the ways that these communities navigate social and political life. It is particularly constructive to synthesize this along Aldon Morris’ “indigenous approach” of social movements.³⁰ This approach is defined as one in which the emergence of a sustained movement within a particular dominated community depends on whether that community possesses 1) certain basic resources 2) social activists with strong ties to mass-based indigenous institutions and 3) tactics and strategies that can be effectively employed against a system of domination.³¹ While the first two tenets are beyond the scope of this project, the latter is at the very core of what liberation prescience maintains the dynamism to do.

Social movement scholars often focus on the role of organizations, or the (past) civic engagement of certain demographics.³² Simply put, there have been many retroactive analyses of political behavior. What the field talks about much less often is how social positionality and precarity impact how individuals view the future of societal structures. In other words, political “otherness” also

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Alan Schussman, Sarah A. Soule, “Process and Protest: Accounting for Individual Protest Participation” (Social Forces, 2005); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Movements in America* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).

informs how you view the potential for and of social realignment. In this dissertation, I seek to explore this alternative perspective about the impact of social positionality on ideas about freedom and liberation. This project seeks to further an idea found in both Robin D.G. Kelley and Cathy Cohen's work that states, "if we expand where we look for political acts and what counts as politics, one can find numerous everyday acts of resistance in the lives of "ordinary people".³³ Ultimately, social movement theory is pivotal for understanding the dynamics of power, political behavior, and social transformation. It then follows that this line of literature is fruitful for contextualizing the long history of resistance amongst marginalized communities. Undoubtedly, its place in this project aids in highlighting why and how liberation prescience would ever come to be.

Though collective action is understood to be produced when groups of politically aligned people join to make claims against or seek restitution against elites, authorities, or other opponents, it is essential to remember that "positionality is not the same as consciousness or liberation".³⁴ Plainly, existing in a precarious social position does make you inherently "radical". In Zora Neale Hurston's famous words, "all skin folk ain't kinfolk". Ultimately, we can take this to understand that we cannot assume that every individual who lies at multiple intersections of marginality is inherently radical, or an abolitionist, or ready for "the revolution". Instead, we should seek to understand what happens when those who have been othered constructively weaponize *otherness* as a mode of production. Put differently, what perspectives and dreams of futurity have their social positionality engendered?

Moreover, we can and should look towards this proffering of liberation prescience to understand that

³³ Cathy J. Cohen, "Deviance As Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics" (Du Bois Review, 2004).

³⁴ Tilly, *Contentious Repertoires*; Tarrow, *Power in Movement*; Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" (GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 1997).

1) liberation itself does not mean the same thing for everyone and that 2) a group's political life can be more dynamically understood by recognizing the gamut of ways that folx navigate the political arena.

Black (Queer) Feminism

The historical and virulent subordination of women — and gender expansive folx — by the draconian systems of patriarchy and heteronormativity has severely altered the political, social, and economic progress of women. As sentiments of resistance grew stronger among these groups, many mobilized to unravel the very systems that sought to suppress and oppress them. Some of these mobilizations have been defined as “feminist” movements. Sometimes theorized as existing in “waves”, feminism has drastically developed and adapted to address the concerns of the times.³⁵ However, women of color — particularly Black women — have always held a peculiar relationship to the mainstream feminist movement. In nascent iterations of feminism, there was a distinct absence of an analysis of race.³⁶ In other words, even in instances where Black women and women of color were included in organizations and leadership, the feminist movement itself lacked a critical analysis of power dynamics other than that of patriarchy. As noted by Audre Lorde in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Rethinking Difference”, “[b]y and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact

³⁵ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Mariner Books, 1983); Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge Classics, 1990); Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (University of Illinois Press, 2017).

³⁶ Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (Rutgers University Press, 1983); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (South End Press, 1984).

exist”.³⁷ In conjunction with the political traditions that were already being established, this led certain groups of women to criticize the movement as one that was insufficient to liberate all women and was instead a movement equipped only to center the experiences of white women. As such, Black women activists, anti-racists, and anti-capitalists mobilized in a particular way that was informed by their social position.³⁸ This mobilization, to be sure, should not be understood as one that was solely birthed out of critique nor as one that currently finds its home there. Black feminism, at its core, is its own intellectual project that extends far beyond a demand to be included in a feminist movement.

The “double jeopardy” of the Black woman had been written about and discussed by Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frances Beal, and many others.³⁹ Anna Julia Cooper, an author and educator, once wrote that “the colored woman of today occupies...a unique position in this country...she is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both”.⁴⁰ As a cadre of Black women found themselves unsatisfied with and invisibilized by previous modes of mainstream feminist thought, they mobilized into their own organizations such as The National Black Feminist Organization and the Combahee River Collective. These Black feminist organizations, they hoped, would more adequately address the “woman question”, the “race problem”, and other forms of oppression that were previously overlooked.⁴¹ These

³⁷ Audre Lorde, *Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference* (Crossing Press, 1980).

³⁸ Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (Washington Square Press, 1970); Combahee, “A Black Feminist Statement”; Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (Vintage, 1981); Lorde, *Age, Race, Class, and Sex*

³⁹ Frances Beal, *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*, in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (Washington Square Press, 1970), 90-100.

⁴⁰ Anna Julia Cooper, *Voice from the South: By a Woman from the South* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁴¹ Combahee, “A Black Feminist Statement”; Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*; Lorde, *Age, Race, Class, and Sex*

organizations began to practice radical epistemologies through a lens of intersectionality that have become known as Black feminist politics.

Radical Black feminism is traditionally understood as a collective struggle against the inextricable systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic oppression.⁴² Black feminist epistemologies emphasize the importance of acknowledging the historical and ongoing experiences of Black women as central to understanding and addressing social and political inequality and injustice. Seeking to dismantle the system of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, Black feminist politics are undergirded by an intersectional analysis of dominant power structures.⁴³ The theory of intersectionality, popularized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights the particularly virulent nexus of systems of oppression and its compounding effects on marginalized individuals.⁴⁴ Though it is a spatial metaphor, intersectionality is not merely about a social space that someone occupies. Rather, it is a lens used to understand the complex oppression that occurs as systems of domination operate in conjunction with one another to enact a particular kind of harm on those on the margins of society.⁴⁵ It quite literally gives the ability to *see* how intersecting systems of power simultaneously enact harm. It urges us to acknowledge that traditional approaches to understanding social ills often oversimplify complex social dynamics by focusing on one dimension of identity at a time. However, intersectionality emphasizes the need to consider how different aspects of identity intersect and mutually shape an individual's experiences and social position. For example, it forces us to examine

⁴² hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*; Lorde, *Age, Race, Class, and Sex*

⁴³ Ibid.; Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," (University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989).

⁴⁴ Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection*); Though often credited with coining the term, Black feminists had been writing about this phenomenon long before it was popularized by Kimberlé Crenshaw.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

how racism and patriarchy concurrently harm Black women differently than solely patriarchy on white women.

Further, the radical potential of radical Black feminism lies in its ability to “queer” the spaces of normativity.⁴⁶ As articulated by scholar-activist Cathy Cohen, it is through this notion of queerness that radical Black feminism finds its transformative power. Her essay “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” is a seminal text that builds upon the legacy of Black feminists and contextualizes it within the field of politics. For Cohen, the potential of queer politics “rests on its ability to advance strategically oriented political identities arising from a more nuanced understanding of power...I am suggesting that the process of movement-building be rooted not in our shared history or identity, but in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges”.⁴⁷ This work was pivotal for making evident the need to “queer” our understanding of (Black) politics. This was a necessary duty as these lenses make clear the fact that there is no finite understanding of what it is to be marginal. As globalism, racial capitalism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and the like continue to cast nets further into the depths of political, social, and economic frameworks, we must cast a wider net to ensure that those who continue to be further marginalized and “othered” are brought to the fore. Simply, it is not enough to understand the lens of intersectionality. Rather, it must be employed in such a way that those on the margins never become invisible or out of reach.

⁴⁶ Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Ultimately, radical Black feminism operates with the understanding that “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression”.⁴⁸ Black Feminist politics have a particular history of being constructively critical and radically imaginative. This comes with the task of remaining intellectually malleable in order to consistently redefine the bounds of what it means to utilize a radical lens. Encompassing both Black feminist and queer theory, Black queer feminism is often characterized as a praxis that deliberately brings those who are most marginalized “from margin to center”.⁴⁹ One of its central precepts is to confront the normalizing power that oppresses and marginalizes those who lie outside of “normative” identities and seeks to challenge mores of society. The experiences of those who are — for example — poor, undocumented, queer, trans, unhoused, or disabled become the epicenter of the work. The utility of Black Queer Feminism lies in centering those marginalized groups. If those who traditionally lie the furthest away from political power are then moved to the center, then many margins can be addressed.

Black Queer Feminism seeks to challenge and deconstruct normative ideas through an understanding of the simultaneity of dynamic, hegemonic power structures. Here, the term “queer” does not refer solely to sexual identity, preference, or expression. Rather, it refers to groups of individuals that have been politically categorized as “other”, “deviant”, or “non-normative” and a “political stance that pushes back on equality and normal as goals or values, and to recognize that queer

⁴⁸ Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement”.

⁴⁹ Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens”; Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatterMovement” (The Feminist Wire, 2014); hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*; Patrisse Cullors and Asha Bandele, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* (St. Martin's Press, 2018).; Janae Bonsu, *Black Queer Feminism as Praxis: Building an Organization and a Movement in Black Women's Liberatory Pedagogies* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2017); Charlene Carruthers, *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements* (Beacon Press, 2018).

liberation always requires the end to other forms of domination such as misogyny and capitalism”.⁵⁰

Any political analysis that does not foreground “those who stand on the (out)side of state-sanctioned, normalized, White, middle- and upper-class, male heterosexuality” is simply insufficient.⁵¹

Though a Black queer feminist analysis is hard to confine to one general definition due to its constant remaking, it can be summarized into 5 main tenets.⁵² Black Queer Feminist projects: “1) Analyze (normative) power 2) Link sexism and (cis)heterosexism (with an analysis of racial and economic oppression) 3) Organize around and foreground the voices of the most marginalized, in particular the poor, queer and trans womxn, and queer and trans individuals generally in Black communities 4) Emphasize the necessity of, and generate solutions towards, systemic transformation 5) Are local, national, and international in geopolitical scope”.⁵³ It is necessary to acknowledge the fact that Black Queer Feminism is not external to nor mutually exclusive of radical Black feminism. To explain, Black Queer Feminism is an extension of previous iterations of Black feminist politics. In fact, Black Queer Feminism finds its roots in radical Black feminism and merely expounds upon it considering the bounds of the contemporary political climate.

If Black women and gender expansive folks are burdened by the “matrix of domination”, I posit that they have novel ideas about solutions to the matrix.⁵⁴ Plainly, it must follow that their visions of the future are largely shaped by their history of social, political, and economic precarity. The inimitable social position of Black women and GX folks on the margins leaves open a particularly

⁵⁰ Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens”; Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter*; Carruthers, *Unapologetic*; Erica Meiners, Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Beth Richie, *Abolition. Feminism. Now*. (Haymarket Press, 2021).

⁵¹ Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance”.

⁵² Tayler J. Mathews, “Black Queer Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge”, PhD Diss., (Clark Atlanta University, 2020).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

radical space of opportunity for world (re)making. This dissertation seeks to understand how these groups serve as architects of the future, as freedom must be made.

Black Queer Theory

The fields of queer theory and Black studies have become imbricated in a manner that has given rise to Black Queer Studies. This burgeoning field seeks to “stage a dialogic and dialectic encounter between these two liberatory and interrogatory discourses”.⁵⁵ The dialogue between those two fields fully sketches out the realm of Black possibility and futurity through its exploration of questions that had, historically, been overlooked and understudied. Further,

“Black heterosexual male leadership in the black studies movement either ignored or relegated to secondary status the experiences and contributions of black women...Black women’s institutional work as well as intellectual interventions in black studies departments remained understudied, devalued, or marginalized by the reigning black male theorists who deemed ‘race’ to be the proper sphere of study”.⁵⁶

Black scholars have since interrogated the intersection of the fields of Black Studies and Queer Theory in order to shift this androcentric “sphere of study” to more accurately reflect the heterogeneity of Black experiences.⁵⁷ To be clear, “queering” Black studies was a necessary step to combat the invisibility of non-normative Black women and gender expansive people within academic work. It is imperative to remember that “...these women profoundly deepened the Black Radical Imagination, producing a vision of liberation expansive enough for all”.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” (Stanford Law Review, 1991).; Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens”; Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*; Kai Green, Marquis Bey, “Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation” (Souls, 2017).

⁵⁸ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.

As some manifestations of liberation prescience seek to deconstruct hegemonic dichotomies that leave folx on the margins of the margins, this study of liberation prescience can and must account for a reshaping of the traditional understanding of certain categories that have been used for the purposes of political “othering”. The need for this reconception is made clear in a conversation between Kai M. Green, Professor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality studies, and Marquis Bey, Professor of Black Studies, in which Kai Green posits that, “There is a kind of body that the word feminist hails to the imaginary, the body of a cisgender woman. It is less common that we discuss the other bodies or ways that feminist theorization and praxis is used by and useful for people who are not cisgender women”.⁵⁹ The default image of “woman” has been the work of patriarchy, homophobia, and heteronormativity. This dissertation explores how folks might be seeking to deconstruct and undo these sorts of logics in order to develop a reality where there are no hegemonic default images of particular categories, but rather a space where someone’s access to resources is not defined by how marginal their identities are or how politicized they’ve become. This, I believe, highlights the need for a particular study of the political life of “nonnormative” women and GX folx. We must excavate their “liberatory penchants”, at least to the degree they allow us to.⁶⁰ Without it, we risk perpetuating the very systems that collectives of folks are working to dismantle.

Afrofuturism

Coined by Mark Dery in 1993, Afrofuturism is often defined as a critical perspective that explores the art, music, writing, philosophy, aesthetics, and activism that Black creators have used to

⁵⁹ Green, Bey, “Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet”.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

articulate, dream of, and architect Black futures. It was widely explored in the late 1990s by Alondra Nelson and has since been understood to encompass a diasporic and multi-media approach to futurity and liberation.⁶¹ Creators such as Octavia Butler, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Sun Ra, Janelle Monae, and Funkadelic, just to name a few, have been hailed as major contributors to the aesthetics and culture of afrofuturism.⁶² The work and power of afrofuturism has ultimately been characterized as:

“[...] the story of musicians, artists, writers, philosophers, fashion icons, filmmakers, costume and set designers, actors, activists and academics who have believed in a better future for Black people — and for all people. Afrofuturism, more concretely, can be understood as a wide-ranging social, political and artistic movement that dares to imagine a world where African-descended peoples and their cultures play a central role in the creation of that world”.⁶³

Afrofuturism, at its most fundamental definition, is an exploration of the ways in which Black folks of the diaspora have used aesthetics, fiction, and imagination to bridge African traditions to storylines about potential futures.

Many discussions of afrofuturism are centered around technology, but it remains equally essential to explore its roots within Black-led social movements. Though it has sometimes only retroactively been understood to be true, Black-led movements, insurgency, and other expressions have often been informed by and sustained through afrofuturist practices. For example, Cedric Robinson’s *Black Movements in America* chronicles the emergence of a “Black consciousness” that develops with the resistance of enslaved peoples in the 16th and 17th centuries and continues into and beyond the

⁶¹ Dery, “Black to the Future”.; Alondra Nelson, *Afrofuturism: A Special Issue of Social Text* (Duke University Press, 2002).; Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).

⁶² Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993).; Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland Arts Society, 2018).; Kevin L. Clark, “Artists Who Define Afrofuturism In Music: Sun Ra, Flying Lotus, Janelle Monae, Shabaka Hutchings & More” (Recording Academy, 2022).

⁶³ Delan Bruce, “Afrofuturism: From the Past to the Living Present” (UCLA Magazine, 2020).

Civil Rights Movement.⁶⁴ Robinson makes explicitly clear the African consciousness that informed the politics of Black insurgency and radicalism. Put simply, Robinson details how Black movements have always been informed by the desire to achieve conditions of freedom and autonomy. These movements were not called “afrofuturistic” at the time in which they were happening, but we now understand that to be the case due to their commitment to using their repertoires and epistemologies on a path to liberation. Afrofuturism’s usefulness within social movements is well explained in *The Black Speculative Arts Movement: Black Futurity* as it states, “[i]n our current system of capitalism, the products themselves often hide the processes that led to their creation. As a result, we are forced to investigate these processes and create methodologies to translate meaning and knowledge from the arcane”. One such process, they argue, is afrofuturism. Ultimately, they argue that human expressions — art, music, film, etc. — exist in both “Future/Past”.⁶⁵

When writing about afrofuturism, Mark Dery pondered, “[c]an 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?”.⁶⁶ Liberation prescience seeks to explore the actions taken on behalf of communities whose past has been rendered untraceable. On this note, Ytasha Womack, author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci Fi and Fantasy*, noted that “...afrofuturism helps connect us to these histories that aren’t discussed or aren’t really spoken of as much. I think that a lot of the works that people are creating is in part a process to connect to some of what appears to be lost history, or maybe not lost history but not recorded or popularized in traditional

⁶⁴ Robinson, *Black Movements in America*.

⁶⁵ Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, eds., *The Black Speculative Arts Movement: Black Futurity, Art+Design* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2016).

⁶⁶ Dery, “Black to the Future”.

media”.⁶⁷ This exploration of liberation prescience will seek to uncover the works that young Black GX folx and women are creating in order to forge this very connection to both the past and the future in that “science fiction is now a research and development department within a futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow”.⁶⁸ Similar to both afrofuturism and Sankofa, I argue that practices within liberation prescience employ knowledge of the past in order to forge new futures.⁶⁹ Liberation prescience is a project of afrofuturism as it contains the practice of using both backward-thinking and forward-thinking as a radical method of planning and building.

III. Conclusion

This project is seated at the nexus of four major fields of literature. In order to explore the formation and political relevance of liberation prescience, I turned to social movement theory, Black feminist thought, afrofuturism, and queer theory as guideposts. In assembly with one another, these literatures highlight 1) the need, purpose, and scope of radical social movements 2) the development of Black feminist epistemologies and 3) the contemporary nature of Black queer feminist praxes.

Significance

In this project, I have uncovered answers to the question of how young Black women and gender expansive activists “think otherwise” about political equality, freedom, and liberation. To recap, the research objectives are as follows: 1) introduce liberation prescience as an epistemological praxis of freedom 2) better understand young Black women and gender expansive folks as mystical political actors within a white supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy and 3) be able to lend some explanatory power

⁶⁷ Womack, *Afrofuturism*.

⁶⁸ Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism” (CR: The New Centennial Review, 2003).

⁶⁹ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*; Kara Keeling, “Queer Times, Black Futures” (Duke University Press, 2017).

to the ritualistic political behavior of these young Black people in movement. I've offered liberation prescience, which I posit is an ontological praxis of freedom that characterizes the spectrum of political behavior that those in movement might engage in with the understanding that freedom must be made. Posing young Black women and GX activists and organizers as architects of freedom, this study proceeds by understanding how these groups use their lived experience, knowledge of past, present, and future, and repertoires of action to navigate current political conditions in an intentional pursuit of new ones. I investigate their political commitments by exploring how they decide what challenges to make and how to make them. More importantly: how do they arrive at the answers to these questions? This project makes a significant contribution to the fields of Black politics and social movement theory as it brings forth a new understanding of the relationship between liberation as praxis and political behavior.

Structure

This project is spread amongst five chapters. These chapters entail an introduction, three substantive chapters, and a conclusion. The substantive chapters include a review of the literature, a theoretical foundations chapter on liberation prescience, and a chapter discussing the interviews and focus groups. The introduction chapter has explored a statement of the problem, the research design, study rationale, and the outline for the rest of the dissertation. The literature review provides an analysis of the state of and gaps within the fields of social movement theory, Black feminism, afrofuturism, and queer theory. The theory chapter introduces liberation prescience as an ontological praxis that explores the spectrum of behaviors that young Black women and GX activists utilize to bring about the world in which they would like to experience freedom. In other words, this chapter

centers these folx as architects of freedom that possess the creativity and hope to challenge the status quo of the current conditions of the world. The methodology of this dissertation, discussed in chapter four, includes focus groups and semi-structured interviews. I discuss the process, design, and findings of each mode of data collection. Further, I detail the data collection process and include a guide for the coding scheme. I then analyze the data and discuss its implications for this project. The concluding chapter summarizes the main findings of the dissertation and highlights the main contributions and implications. This chapter explores the contributions of liberation prescience, the way young Black women and GX activists and organizers think about the political arena as they seek freedom, and why these findings are integral to social science. Further, I propose recommendations for future research and sketch a plan for my future book project.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

*“Audre Lorde teaches us that our silence will not provide protection.
Speaking our truths helps us imagine and create the world we want to
live in, despite systems of oppression that tell us that we are not enough.”*

- Charlene Carruthers

Introduction

The exploration and survey of people as political actors that hold political ideas, endeavors, beliefs, and commitments has been a fundamental line of inquiry within the field of political science. Though it has been deeply explored, there is still much to be gleaned about the politics forged on the margins. By “on the margins” I am referring to folx whose social positionality is particularly impacted by the intersection of multiply-marginalized identities. Many communities are often left out of or are not made central within social scientific studies that seek to advance our theoretical and empirical understanding of political behavior. The problem is not, however, simply about *who* is being left out here, but *what* is being left out. By this, I mean that “mainstream” studies that explore political behavior have often lacked a deep analysis of intersecting identity markers — such as race, class, and gender. To understand political behavior with both breadth and depth requires analyses that take seriously the commitments of *all* who impact or are impacted by the political realm. For this reason, this project focuses on the reasons why and methods through which young Black women and gender-expansive activists and organizers navigate the political arena in the ways that they do. In other words, it seeks to uncover the politics that are forged on the margins as it takes seriously the impact of social positionality on mobilization, political identities, and political behavior. Further, this dissertation seeks to understand the relationship between how folks think about the future and its

impact on their political decisions. I use this chapter to examine the relevant literature within the three theoretical guideposts of this project — Black political behavior, social movements, and Afrofuturism — as these lines of inquiry predicate and contextualize the work of liberation prescience as praxis. I begin the remainder of this chapter with a review of works that have produced relevant and foundational theories, frameworks, and concepts within Black political behavior. I will then briefly review the literature on social movements as it relates to behavior and power. I will conclude the chapter by examining literature on Afrofuturism that has significantly contributed to the theoretical underpinnings of liberation prescience.

The Examination of Political Behavior within Black Politics

From its inception, traditional inquiries into Black political life have been rife with inaccurate and insufficient depictions of the political actions and thoughts of Black people. Perhaps one of the most pervasively troublesome theories that informed early studies was the notion of “the problem of the powerless” in which an oppressed group seeks to make a bargain but lacks the resources necessary to secure cooperation from the opposing group.¹ This idea, though never said verbatim, was derived from James Q. Wilson’s “The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy”. It is in this article that Wilson made claims about the tie between disparate social conditions — namely poverty — and its impacts on what he called “the underclass”. While this article sought to provide insight into the relationship between poverty and social and economic issues, it birthed a point of contention within the field as its findings suggested not only that the “disadvantaged” were at fault

¹ Wilson defines a bargain as “a situation in which two or more parties seek conflicting ends through the exchange of compensations” (291).

for their own plight, but that they were powerless communities in need of saving. Though political resistance is not what Wilson was directly seeking to explore, the article does pose marginalized communities as those that must seek “unconventional” means to further their interests by way of political behavior. This fueled several lines of inquiry in Black political behavior that sought to challenge the idea of Black communities as powerless and uninterested in political life.

From debates about its academic merit to the creation of its own scholarly field, the nature, character, and essence of Black politics has been a point of contention within social science. Within social science literature, there have been many propositions about what shapes and informs the political lives — especially behavior — of Black people in America. Lines of inquiry into this question explore various aspects of how Black people think about and navigate the political sphere. Of increasing interest has been a look into Black political resistance and struggles for social, economic, and political equity. This arises out of a deeply documented history of resistance, whereby marginalized folks have challenged the status quo and longed for better futures.² This dissent has taken many forms throughout history, beginning — in the United States — with the resistance of enslaved people.³ From the maroonage of the plantation to the burning of cop cars during the Uprisings of 2020, many Black people in America have sought refuge from a political, social, and economic system rooted in anti-Blackness. While some of the political resources available have changed over time, there has been a consistent seeking of freedom and “making a way out of no way” amongst those questing after different worldly conditions. As lived conditions, communities, spirituality and religion, individual

² DuBois, 1935; Robinson, 1997; Dawson, 2001; Cohen, 2010; Carruthers, 2018; Ransby, 2018; Bey, 2020; Kaba, 2021; Harris, 2023; Jackson, 2023

³ Robinson, 1997

relationships, the past, and conceptions of futurity shape Black experiences in America, they also shape the manner in which Black people navigate the political arena.⁴ Black political behavior, as explored in this literature review then, concerns the ways in which Black Americans continue to craft possibilities with varying amounts of access to political and social power. This literature review will explore three major perspectives from which Black political behavior has been and is analyzed: historical factors, racial identity and consciousness, and structural/institutional relationships.

Historicizing Black Political Behavior

As Black people in America continue to endure race-based subjugation, it is logical for them to evaluate and navigate the world based on the treatment their racial group has received.⁵ Historical context, which is paramount for understanding the roots of political engagement amongst Black Americans, contextualizes the role of major historical circumstances — such as slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement — in shaping a racial and political consciousness in the wake of race-based subjugation. Through understanding a legacy of disenfranchisement, segregation, and racial violence, social scientists then better understand the resulting formation of racial consciousness and collective struggles for freedom.

Black political behavior in the United States finds its roots in the resistance of those who were captured, enslaved, and forcefully brought over to “the new world”. In the months-long journey, enslaved people seized opportunities to organize acts of resistance despite the chains, shackles, and inhumane quarters. Even before reaching the coast, there were plans and attempts to escape their

⁴ Robinson, 1983; Morris, 1986; Taylor, 2017; Gillion & Posey, 2019; Haley, 2019; Jenkins, 2021

⁵ Bobo, 2024

captors as “shipboard resistance ranged from an individual act of defiance—an isolated act of violence, or a (normally fatal) attempt to leap overboard—to major revolts which descended into a life-and-death struggle between Africans and sailors. For example, the enslaved people aboard the *Clare* mutinied and successfully drove the crew from the vessel, landing and liberating themselves near Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast in 1729”.⁶ Further accounts of some of these attempts were documented in log books such as the archive from Captain Richard Norris who noted in June 1770, “the slaves this day proposed making an insurrection and a few of them got off their handcuffs” and “the slaves attempted to force up the gratings in the Night with a design to murder the whites or drown themselves...”.⁷ Considering the forced removal from their homes and a collective desire to escape captivity, the journeys upon these ships were a pivotal moment for the formation of a collective othered identity. What I mean to say here is that enslaved people aboard these ships hailed from various places, spoke different languages, and had completely different cultures. As it follows, they often found themselves unable to communicate with one another, including even those they were shackled to. As a result, their collective experience, plight, and captivity aided in the construction of a notion of “Blackness”, the one thing they all shared as they sought freedom.

These moments of resistance and sense of escapism were not confined to these ships. Once enslaved Africans were forcefully brought over to America, these political acts only grew in frequency and intensity. Maroonage is a term frequently used when referring to the rebellions witnessed during the days of mass African enslavement. Maroonage refers to the practice of maroon communities,

⁶ <https://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/?id=A0035>

⁷ <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/history-of-slavery/middle-passage>

which were settlements of escaped enslaved people who formed independent societies in remote or inaccessible areas. Maroon communities served as bastions of freedom and resistance, challenging the institution of slavery and impelling enslaved individuals to seek liberation. For many who study race, politics, and resistance, these communities — along with the resistance observed on plantations — can be regarded as a sort of genesis of Black resistance in the United States. The collective struggle for freedom by Black people in America, then, has a long history that has continued to inform the political behavior of Black folks today, which is the focus of this dissertation.

Though moments of Black resistance are not exclusively tethered to major historical moments, it is through the exploration of these events that social scientists can conduct analyses of mass behavior. These analyses then allow the field to have a better grasp on what is happening and, therefore, what could happen in the political realm. These critical moments within history serve as a boon for full inquiries into Black political life. Take, for example, Aldon Morris's argument in *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, in which he highlights the roots of the collective action that brought forth political change (e.g. the Civil Rights Act of 1964) and the role of leaders, churches, and organizations in galvanizing the movement. This analysis provides a deep look into the origins of a movement that served as a pivotal moment in Black [political] history and is a testament to the necessity of the historical context of Black political life. The events of the past, to be sure, color both our present and our future in myriad ways. The past is not merely a temporal designation but serves as a reservoir of experience, knowledge, cultural productions, and political acumen. While, in many ways, the past is often something that some folx seek to shed, their journeys forward remain sculpted by its shadow. This is perhaps better explained by Christopher Paul Harris as

he writes, “to take stock of the prolonged and unabating struggle waged by the dispossessed against domination is not merely an account of events in the past but instead represents the theoretical basis for revolutionary action, a blueprint for our present”.⁸ Harris builds off of Sylvia Wynter here to say that “the past” is a repository from which current and future generations have the ability to choose what to take with them as they make moves towards the future. This is expressed further by political organizer Chiara Acu who stated, “[o]ur bodies are time machines evolved in harmony with pre-capitalist ecosystems and already primed for post-capitalist futures”.⁹ Fundamentally, Acu is gesturing towards the fact that political actors carry with them knowledge of the past that can be leveraged to shape future lived experiences. This is particularly salient for movement actors, as this “evolution” and “priming” created and sustains the Black Radical Tradition. This tradition, as written about by Cedric Robinson, refers to a longstanding commitment to challenging political and social norms and systems.¹⁰ These challenges are rooted in the historical pursuit of liberation for Black communities, once again highlighting the need for deep, historical comprehension when it comes to Black political behavior. Further, though the Black Radical Tradition is rooted in a shared history, many of the perspectives and approaches within this tradition vary to quite a degree. It is for this reason that the exploration of how Black political perspectives have evolved should be and are studied with the depth that they are.

Racial Identity and Consciousness

⁸ Harris, 2023

⁹ Acu, 2024

¹⁰ Robinson, 1983

Racial identity and consciousness is another perspective through which the political behavior of Black Americans has been analyzed as it makes clear the relationship between the formation of a racial identity and political undertakings. A seminal text that centralizes the prominence of this relationship is Professor Michael Dawson's *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics*. Here, Dawson states that "African-American politics, including political behavior, is different. It has been shaped by historical forces that produce a different pattern of political behavior from the pattern found among white citizens".¹¹ This difference, as evinced by many texts, is not only a result of these "historical forces", but has continued to be a critical site for understanding the various impetuses for Black political ideas, action, and theory.

In *Behind the Mule*, Dawson offers the concept of the "Black Utility Heuristic" whereby Black Americans decide what's best for them based on what they think is best for their [racial] group.¹² In other words, it is the idea that things which are good or bad for the group are good or bad for the individual. This proxy for political decision-making has been found to be a significant factor in more fully understanding the spectrum of how Black Americans think and act. Given the nature of this dissertation and its goal of understanding how young Black activists make political decisions, the Black Utility Heuristic is a foundational framework for understanding what bears on how Black folks chart a course through the political domain. However, one of the oversights of Dawson's work is that — while empirically robust — it did not sufficiently account for the intersection of race with other identities

¹¹ Dawson, 1994

¹² Ibid.

such as gender and sexuality. This led to deeper inquiries that built off of Dawson's work in a way that sought to fill this chasm.

The implications for this type of lacuna are made clear in various works that seek to center Black [Queer] Feminist analyses.¹³ No review of Black political behavior literature is complete or adequate without the exploration of the contributions of Black Feminist Politics and praxis. As mentioned in the introduction, Black Feminism and Black Queer Feminist politics are traditionally understood as a collective struggle to dismantle inextricable systems of domination which includes, but is not limited to racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic oppression.¹⁴ Many of these Black Feminist texts, then, advance our understanding of political behavior across and within lines of identity. There exists a plethora of critical texts and works that explore political behavior while making central the fact that systems of power are inextricably linked and, as such, must all be interrogated if they are to be broken down. More pointedly, Black [queer] Feminist Politics takes seriously the fact that political life cannot be fully understood without recognizing what has been termed the "matrix of domination", "interlocking oppression", and even "double jeopardy". This means that when making political decisions, folks should remain acutely aware of how the inextricability of these systems force certain people to live on the margins of the margins. A recognition and centering of this fact has produced many frameworks, praxes, concepts, and theories from Black Feminist works that have been integral for the comprehensive study of Black political life.

¹³ As stated in the introduction, this project understands "queer" as in alignment with bell hooks when she stated, "Queer not as being about who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but 'queer' as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live".

¹⁴ Here, the word radical should be understood with regard to its Latin origin. Radical is derived from the Latin adjective "radicalis" which translates to "of or relating to a root" or "going to the origin".

Perhaps of most salience here is Professor Cathy Cohen's *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Within this seminal text, Cohen delves into the complexities of identity within the Black community. Cohen — building off of other seminal Black feminist texts — argues that the Black community is composed of individuals with varying life experiences, beliefs, and proximity to power. She explicates this further as she states:

“...this theory recognizes that the processes through which groups become marginalized and the options of resistance available to any specific marginal community vary, and must be addressed with attention to the particular context. Theories that focus only on general patterns of power and powerlessness ignore characteristics that are unique to a group, relying instead on simple categories that gloss over the specific status and history of a community”.¹⁵

This understanding, as Cohen's argument suggests, is foundational for a more extensive attention to not only Black lived experience, but Black political behavior.

This becomes even more evident in Cohen's discussion of “cross-cutting” issues and “secondary marginalization”. The former is a result of a group of individuals who share similar identities being subject to intra-group cleavages when it comes to their interests. The latter, which is rooted in respectability politics, is a phenomenon in which sub-groups within a community have their needs and experiences overlooked as the “elite” members of the group seek to make their needs not only legible, but legitimate to the over-all predominant population. This means, then, that the subgroups are subjected to further disempowerment — secondary marginalization — as certain [cross-cutting] issues become prioritized over others. Of course, the cleavages here become more rigid across particular lines of social positionality such as gender, sexuality, physical ability, and socioeconomic status.¹⁶

¹⁵ Cohen, 1999

¹⁶ This is not an exhaustive list.

Though the formation of these cleavages are not central to the goals of this dissertation, the attention to what Black communities — sub-groups and “elite” groups — want, prioritize, and dream of *are* central. What this project primarily takes not only from Cohen’s work but from Black Feminism is its attention to how politics on the margins are forged.

Structural and Institutional Relationships

Structural and institutional relationships carry significant implications for the ways in which Black people engage. From group threat to racial representation, the networks that exist across and within Black people inform their political commitments. Interactions with various institutions — such as political parties, the carceral system, government agencies, and others — bear on people’s access to resources, and therefore, their political participation.¹⁷ Political scientist Jamila Michener argues that a “substantial and growing body of research has shown that the structure and design of government programs (and the organizations to which they delegate) can influence political decision-making across a broad spectrum of actors by channeling resources, generating interests, and shaping interpretive schemas”.¹⁸ This influence on political decision-making, therefore, carries significant implications for individuals as they not only decide how to navigate the political arena, but as they reckon with what resources are and are not readily available to them. The latter is particularly relevant for the purposes of this study, as proximity to — or away from — power and resources serve as a proxy for political, social, and economic dissatisfaction that can give rise to political resistance. As folks think about their futures

¹⁷ Cohen, 1999; Dawson, 2002; Alexander, 2010; Michener, 2019; Posey, 2019

¹⁸ Michener, 2019. “Policy Feedback in a Racialized Polity”

and what they'd have access to, this then impacts their choices about how they navigate towards those things.

Interactions with institutions are often sought to be understood in social science through studies of engagement with electoral politics. In other words, social scientists often seek to understand the political life of a group through studying their voting behaviors and patterns which has proven to not only be flat, but insufficient. Therefore, deeper explanations of who participates — as well as how and when — have become central lines of inquiry within the field of political science and Black politics. While foundational for producing a full picture of political behavior, civic engagement is certainly not the only — or main — form of political participation that folks regularly engage in. In fact, the focus of many early studies on electoral politics collapsed an understanding of political behavior as it advanced the idea that voting was the primary form of political behavior that held any significant implications.¹⁹ However, scholars of related fields were integral in reframing this. To explain further, race scholars, Black feminist thinkers, and queer theorists produced significant research that not only challenged this idea, but allowed social scientists to remain attuned to the implications of a wider set of political acts.²⁰ These studies lie at the foundation of this project, as it seeks to understand Black political behavior amongst a particular group in whichever ways they exist. To illustrate, scholars such as E. Patrick Johnson, Saidiya Hartman, Sarah Haley, Hazel Carby, and Moya Bailey — to name a few — are some contemporary scholars whose work has significantly contributed to this shifting narrative.

¹⁹ Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Putnam, 1995.; Lewis-Beck, Michael et al., 2008

²⁰ Combahee River Collective, 1977; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Collins, 1990; Kelley, 1994; Cohen, 1997; hooks, 2000;

Through an understanding of the historical roots of Black resistance, the salience of collectivity and racial identity, and relationships with American institutions, one can more adeptly mine the cornerstones of the rebellious spirit that has emerged amongst some sectors of Black Americans. It is this spirit of resistance that this project seeks to critically engage, with a scope set on a particular segment of folx whose political lives are much less understood despite their novelty and increasing impact on the realm of American Politics. The political lives I am alluding to here are those of young Black women and gender-expansive activists and organizers. More specifically, a gap within the literature has sparked questions about the ways in which even the most marginalized Black Americans vie for power and influence while reckoning with their positionality. Encumbered by secondary marginalization and a particular sort of precarity, certain groups within the Black community — namely LGBTQ+ folx, sex workers, those who are neurodivergent, and the like — find themselves mobilizing in unique ways.²¹ These modes of action are sometimes characterized as infrapolitical, as they often do not meet commonly accepted criteria to be understood as “traditionally” political.²² The reasons why and methods through which these folx organize, I argue, are largely influenced by their social position and their beliefs about how their lives *could* be. These social positions — more specifically, the inequities that they engender — serve as sites of critical contention wherein a reckoning with varying levels of distance from power, protection, and resources occur and serve as an impetus for political resistance.

Social Movements

²¹ Cohen, 1999

²² Its domain encompasses the acts, gestures, and thoughts that are not quite political enough to be perceived as such (Scott, 1990 183).

Though we walk the grounds of a round Earth, the rigid structure of our political system has created sharp edges, corners, and margins within which certain groups of folk have become disparately familiar. By this, I mean to say that it is within these man-made corners that mechanisms of oppression exert particularized harm upon communities that have been rendered as “other”, especially Black folks within a political system rooted in anti-Blackness. From these corners, too, have emerged practices, tactics, and epistemologies of resistance. As such, the various impetuses that influence how and why Black people make challenges in the ways that they do have remained a large line of inquiry within social science. This work has been instrumental in developing lenses, frameworks, and theories that have provided insight into the political commitments of Black people in America. Within the field of American Politics, scholars are predominantly taken up with questions of power in the political arena. These questions of power surround political behavior, public opinion, and institutions and are often meant to determine who gets what, when, and why. Though an indispensable piece of American politics, topics that study marginalized groups are often less central in the field, characterizing topics such as race, gender, and class as less deserving of study. This lacuna is glaring, and we can turn to many scholars who have demonstrated the importance of studying social movements within American politics.²³ Social movements are key to understanding several questions of the political arena, how people understand it, how people navigate it, how people are repressed by it, and how people challenge it. By studying social movements, we can interrogate these concerns.

²³ Olson, 1965; Tarrow, 1994; Ransby, 2003; Tilly, 2006; Woody, 2015; Ransby, 2018; Harris, 2023

The question of “when will ordinary people pour into the streets, risking life and limb to lay claim to their rights?” is one that has plagued social movement scholars.²⁴ Though many scholars have theorized the features of a social movement, we have been hard-pressed to explain what exactly constitutes a social movement. However, scholars have generally come to understand a social movement as an organized and sustained challenge against authorities, institutions, or other sources of repression by groups that are typically perceived to be marginal.²⁵ These sustained challenges are born out of contentious politics, which occurs when groups are motivated and able to participate in extra-systemic activities and institutional resistance such as protest, boycotts, and policy obstruction. This section of review will highlight the importance of the study of social movements to the field of American Politics.

The literature on social movements demonstrates that a movement can be defined as sustained, collective, and action-oriented challenges against a particular target (i.e. policies, institutions, elites, etc.) by a “less powerful” group that shares a common purpose.²⁶ This group seeks to challenge and dismantle the status quo, as they view their current situation to be unjust, unfavorable, and/or undesirable. Considering this marginal position, the group has an incentive to seek a different outcome. When protest leaders are successful in activating reference publics of these groups, it will then become more likely that elites will respond to and address marginal concerns.²⁷ It is in these instances in which marginal groups have obtained bargaining tools that they are able to make their issues salient within the political arena. In fact, scholars generally agree that a prerequisite for

²⁴ Tarrow, 1994

²⁵ Lipsky, 1968; Tilly, 1993; Tarrow, 1994

²⁶ Tilly, 1993; Tarrow, 1994

²⁷ Snow et al, 1986

movements is a period of contentious politics. Contentious politics occurs when a collective claim is made against authorities.²⁸ Furthermore, a moment of contentious politics cannot be defined as a social movement while it is in process, for the idea of it being sustained conflict with opponents is an essential component of the definition. The takeaway here is that movements occur when the opportunity for political and/or social realignment becomes possible.²⁹

Another important feature of social movement activity is repertoires of contention. As defined by Charles Tilly, these repertoires are sets of actions that individuals can use to protest the state. Repertoires of contention contain strategies that range from legal intervention to disruptive politics.³⁰ In simple terms, groups who are staking claims against authorities are in pursuit of some form of power — and perhaps even freedom. When groups are mobilized, they utilize these repertoires to determine which actions will be most successful. Several mobilizations — the Immigrant Rights Movement, Occupy Wall Street and the Movement for Black Lives — have emerged within the last decade. This spike in contentious politics leads social scientists to understand that opportunities for political and social realignment have opened up and the groups who had been negatively impacted by the status quo have realized the potential for change.³¹

Perhaps one of the most seminal social movement texts is Sidney Tarrow's *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Tarrow provided a critical intervention in that he helped not only to define social movements but to understand when and how they emerge, as well as the basis

²⁸ Tarrow, 1998

²⁹ Tilly, 1993; Tarrow, 1994; McAdam, 1999

³⁰ Tilly, 1993

³¹ This realization has become known as “cognitive liberation” (McAdam, 1999).

for collective action. As such, Tarrow provided critical insight into the role of collective action and resistance amongst movement participants. He says:

“Movements characteristically mount *contentious* challenges through disruptive direct action against elites, authorities, other groups, or cultural codes. Most often public in nature, disruption can also take the form of coordinated personal resistance or the collective affirmation of new values”.³²

These instances of coordinated personal resistance and collective affirmation of new values are the very forms of challenges that this project seeks to understand. Tarrow’s insights provide a foundation for this dissertation as he frames the structures and processes of resistance and collective action.

Considering the foundation laid by Tarrow, we must still consider the ways in which the political arena — and, therefore, the kind of challenges being made — are changing. In the United States, race has become “a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the US”.³³ As such, attitudes about race often determine power dynamics and the distribution of resources. This “racial state”, as scholars have come to call it, leaves the needs of certain populations often unaddressed.³⁴ These economic concerns — which are shaped by race — perpetuate disparate social, political, and economic conditions.³⁵ That becomes particularly salient for Black-led social movements, especially those being led by young folks on the margins. As it follows, “given the nature of racial domination, racially based movements deserve their own theorizations and concepts. Lacking a theory on race-based social movements may prevent us from adequately understanding how race rebellions emerge” and operate.³⁶ Many scholars have tended

³² Tarrow, 1994 (4)

³³ Omi & Winant, 1988

³⁴ Gilens, 2005

³⁵ Hacker & Pierson, 2010

³⁶ Kelley, 1996; Bonilla-Silva, 2015

to how movements emerge, how leaders encourage participation, and how movement actors utilize resources.³⁷ Yet, there exists a gap in knowledge when it comes to better understanding the particular strategies that social movement participants employ when deciding how and when to organize. In particular, we lack an understanding of the distinct frameworks that are practiced within contemporary Black-led social movements that allows us to understand the continuous changes that are occurring within and amongst movement spaces. A major goal of this exploration of liberation prescience then is to tend to this gap.

Afrofuturism

Traditionally, when people have used art to envision the future, it has often been done through a lens of whiteness. In these white-centric futures, there is usually some form of “other” being. These beings — commonly depicted as aliens or robots — are ostracized and isolated in a way that is often reminiscent of the Black experience in America as over 500 years of colonialism and anti-Blackness have left Black communities feeling disjointed and misplaced. It is for this reason that many Afrofuturists share a sentiment well articulated by Afrofuturist creative Greg Tate when he stated that “Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine”.³⁸ As the parallels between Black life and science fiction are blatant, Afrofuturism does what traditional speculative fiction does not and would not do — it imagines Blackness beyond the bounds of our current conditions.³⁹ It is an “art form, practice, and methodology that allows Black people to see themselves in the future despite a distressing past and present. It calls upon sci-fi imagery and futuristic ideas to reflect upon the marginalization of

³⁷ Lipsky, 1968; Morris, 1984; Snow et al, 1986; Olson, 1971; McAdam, 1999; Schussman & Soule, 2005; Zepeda-Milan, 2017)

³⁸ Dery, 1994

³⁹ Tate, 2021

Black people”.⁴⁰ The pressing inquiry, then, is about what Black futures look like and how Black life can be imagined beyond its current state. As many Black people are caught in the crosshairs of being both invisible and hypervisible, Afrofuturism provides avenues for new worlds to be envisioned on the terms of those imagining them.⁴¹

As mentioned in the introduction, “Afrofuturism” is a term that was originally coined in Mark Dery’s 1993 “Black to the Future” though people have been engaging with the concept long before then. Popularized by many writers, artists, and musicians, Afrofuturism has come to be understood as a realm of speculative fiction that traverses the intersection of technology, the future, and the African diaspora.⁴² Afrofuturism, then, is “a mode of operation in which you take any kind of action — storytelling, art-making, clothing, architecture — and you infuse it with Afrocentricity but you’re doing it in a way where you’re [referring] back to things in the past. You’re living in the present but you’re also pointing towards the future”.⁴³ Artist Nick Cave created a series of *Soundsuits* that has gained widespread attention, the first of which was created in response to the murder of Rodney King. These suits — upcycled from thrifted or discarded materials such as buttons, doilies, sticks, and feathers — serve as “extravagant costume-sculptures to be protective shields that masked a person’s identity and scrambled notions of race, class, and gender” and were brought about by Cave’s question, “[h]ow do we...look at things that are devalued, discarded, and bring a different kind of relevancy to them?”.⁴⁴ This obfuscation of identifiable characteristics allows for the very sort of expansive existence

⁴⁰ Inverse, 2018 (Afrofuturism Explained: Not Just Black Sci-Fi)

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Dery, 1993; Nelson, 2002; Womack, 2013

⁴³ Fielder, 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgXujySEuIE>)

⁴⁴ Cave, 2009 (<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/soundsuit-80565>)

that many Afrofuturist thinkers dream of. In its simplest definition, Afrofuturism asks: “what happens when we become free to travel the worlds inside of our minds?”.

As Afrofuturism extends beyond literature, these worlds have been prominently expressed — both presently and in the past — through various artistic mediums, especially music. Sun Ra is often hailed as the epitome of “Afrofuturist sound”. He claims to hail from Saturn and utilizes other-worldly sounds and aesthetics within his artistry, and “and crafted space-themed titles to reflect his connection of ancient African culture to the Space Age”.⁴⁵ The name of his band, The Arkestra, serves as a reclamation and reimagination of slave ships as their music serves as a metaphorical vessel for entering other realms. In their song “Door of the Cosmos”, Sun Ra and the Arkestra express, “Love and life/ Interested me so/ That I dared to knock/ At the door of the cosmos”.⁴⁶ As many of their songs express a similar sentiment, Sun Ra and His Arkestra — who perform donned in sparkly headpieces and flashy robes — beckon towards traveling the cosmos in pursuit of things that cannot be found or experienced in the current conditions of the Earth. This desire to travel to other worlds is expressed by many others, including an ethereal song named after Sun Ra where singer theMIND croons, “Since a little one knew I was a martian / Government trying to stop us from departing / I’m done begging for pardons, our planet’s uncharted / Wearing durags at Harvard, dissertation on Martin”.⁴⁷ A starkly political example of Afrofuturist sound is George Clinton’s 1970s group Parliament whose sound “incorporated Afrofuturism concepts”.⁴⁸ In particular, their song “Mothership Connection (Star Child)” uses lyrics from the African American spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and illustrates an extraterrestrial

⁴⁵ [Simmons, 2019](#)

⁴⁶ Sun Ra and His Arkestra, “Door of the Cosmos”. 1979. *Sleeping Beauty*.

⁴⁷ “SUN RA”. Jamila Woods ft. Jasminfire and theMIND. 2019. *Legacy! Legacy!*

⁴⁸ <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/parliament-mn0000129775>

landscape in which a “star child” comes to Earth with the task of delivering messages of liberation through music. George Clinton implores listeners to “free your mind, and come fly...on the Mothership” as he teases the prospect of a different land characterized by better conditions. He goes on to sing:

When you hear seats rumble
You will hear your conscience grumble
Hit me, you gotta hit the band
You have overcome for I am here

Swing down, sweet chariot
Stop and let me ride
Swing down, sweet chariot
Stop and let me ride

Swing low, time to move on
Light years in time, ahead of our time
Free your mind and come fly
With me, it's hip on the mothership groovin'.⁴⁹

Parliament's connection with the mothership is one they hope to extend to others in an attempt to traverse better conditions. This proverbial invitation was accepted by many, including influential rapper, Dr. Dre, who sampled Parliament's beat and lyrics on his 1992 song “Let me Ride” and raps, “swing down, sweet chariot, stop (I wanna ride) and let me ride”.⁵⁰ Important here is not only this shared desire to board “the mothership”, but this recall to African American spirituals as a tool from the past used to forge paths to the future. It here becomes evident the inextricability of past, present, and future as tools of liberation.

⁴⁹ Parliament, 1975 (“Mothership Connection”)

⁵⁰ Dr. Dre, 2005 (“Let Me Ride”)

Further illustrating the use of music to communicate Afrofuturistic messages and themes are several present day artists including Missy Elliot, Kendrick Lamar, Solange, Janelle Monae, and Jamila Woods, to name a few. Missy Elliot's imprint on music is groundbreaking for many reasons, and in this context it is essential to explore her avante-garde music videos and lyrics. In 1997, Missy Elliot released her debut album *Supa Dupa Fly*, whose futuristic and warped sounds, produced by Timbaland, were unlike anything else on the mainstream hip scene. The first single from the album, "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)" is credited as having one of the most innovative music videos of all time, which features the use of a fish-eye camera lens and robotic dance moves that undeniably exude a futuristic feel.⁵¹ While the song's lyrics are not expressly Afrofuturistic, the distorted visuals of an otherworldly Black woman existing as she is was a moment in hip hop history that opened many people's eyes to the world of sci fi and the importance of Black people occupying those spaces.⁵² Janelle Monae's discography is often hailed as an Afrofuturist manifesto from her first studio album, *The ArchAndroid*, to their last, *The Age of Pleasure*. Monae's world-building actually begins on her first EP, *Metropolis: Suite I*, which utilizes android figures "as stand-ins for the marginalized and the oppressed" and introduces us to their first android alter ego, Cindi Mayweather.⁵³ This persona remains an important one as we meet several iterations of Monae's alternate self throughout her discography, each who serve as otherworldly beings who return to Earth to help liberate its inhabitants away from disenfranchisement, alienation, and otherness and towards rapturous freedom and expression. Each of Monae's albums constructs a world

⁵¹ Simmons, 2019

⁵² Anecdotally, many Black people — Black women in particular — cite this video as a moment of awakening that piqued their interest in sci-fi and futuristic media.

⁵³ [Wanak, 2019](#)

in which Monae travels the Universe as a “free ass motherfucker” who refuses to be confined by anything of this (Earth) world. In her song “Q.U.E.E.N.”, she boldly sings:

“I’mma keep leading like a young Harriet Tubman
You can take my wings but I’m still goin’ fly
And even when you edit me the booty don’t lie
Yeah keep singing, I’mma keep writing songs
I’m tired of Marvin asking me, “What’s Going On?”
March to the streets ‘cause I’m willing and I’m able
Categorize me, I defy every label
And while you’re selling dope, we’re gonna keep selling hope
We risin’ up now, you gotta deal you gotta cope
Will you be electric sheep? Electric ladies, will you sleep? Or will you preach?”.⁵⁴

This expansive body of work remains a critical contribution to Afrofuturist thought and aesthetics. In fact, writer Tari Ngangura penned in SyFy Wire, “[i]t is a rare writer who can use sci-fi not simply to chart an escape from reality, but as a pointed reflection of the most minute and magnified experiences that frame and determine the lives of those who live in black skin”.⁵⁵

The lyrics and aesthetics of various artists have become influential pieces of many movement spaces. Take for example Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright”, whose lyrics have been chanted in the streets of many protests. One verse, primarily, can be heard in the streets as a chant of hope and prophecy: “We gon’ be alright. Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon’ be alright”.⁵⁶ Afrofuturism, here, is the proclamation that despite what is being faced in the moment, better times are to come. Important too are lyrics that allude to “better times” that have come to pass such as singer Solange’s angelic declaration that she “saw things I imagined”.⁵⁷ The salience of these — and other — proclamations is

⁵⁴ Monae, 2013. “Q.U.E.E.N.”. *Electric Lady*.

⁵⁵ Ngangura, Tari. 2018. “Octavia Butler and America as only Black Women See it.”

⁵⁶ Lamar, 2015. “Alright”. *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

⁵⁷ Solange, 2019. “Things I Imagined”. *When I Get Home*.

the fact that, without expressly utilizing the language, they rely on Afrofuturist principles to sonically transport listeners to a point in time and space that is better and different from their present condition. As the primary sentiment that undergirds many movement spaces is one that seeks to secure better conditions, the use of Afrofuturist lyrics, chants, and aesthetics have come to be frequently utilized tools. These aesthetics, though expressed through various mediums, are largely present in contemporary film. Black film directors — such as Ava Duvernay, Ryan Coogler, and Jordan Peele — have helped to launch Afrofuturism into the public lexicon. The 2018 Marvel film *Black Panther* is often credited with garnering mainstream attention for Black sci fi films in the 21st century.⁵⁸ Seeing the fictional world of Wakanda — though first introduced in comic books in the ‘60s — was the beginning of a Black cultural moment, one in which we saw what a Black world free of colonial influence might look like.

When the world of science fiction and speculative fiction emerged, it was flooded with aesthetics of future worlds almost entirely occupied by white people.⁵⁹ In fact, “only 8% of the top grossing sci-fi and fantasy films featured a protagonist of color, half of which were played by Will Smith”.⁶⁰ For some creatives, the response was to infuse these existing stories with representations of Blackness. For others, it stemmed a new segment — one that utilized African diasporic aesthetics by creating alternative futures in which Blackness was centralized, hoisted up, and unencumbered by European or North American colonialism.⁶¹ What I mean here is that Afrofuturism as we know it was birthed out of a desire to imagine, visualize, and create alternative Black futures that prominently

⁵⁸ [Say it Loud, 2019](#)

⁵⁹ Some cite the show “The Jetsons” as an example.

⁶⁰ [Barton, Massie, and Posner, 2016](#)

⁶¹ Ibid.

feature societies crafted from the various cultures of the diaspora.⁶² These Afrofuturist depictions, however, are not merely words on a page or images on a screen. The work of these thinkers and scholars shows how speculative fiction is more than pure “fiction”, and instead pensively engages with the project of imaging alternate — not fictive — present and future conditions. As Ashley Clarke wrote in *The Guardian*, Afrofuturism is “the centering of the international black experience in alternate and imagined realities, whether fiction or documentary; past or present; science fiction or straight drama”.⁶³ It has, assuredly, extended into an animating framework within social movements and protest activity. In fact, scholar Walidah Imarisha wrote, “Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction”.⁶⁴ As many Black-led social movements are driven by the desire to create more equitable social conditions, an Afrofuturist lens has been instrumental in developing ideas about how these worlds might look. It is also worth noting that, despite the name, it is not a requirement that these depictions take place in the future. It does not seek to relegate expansive Blackness as something to be experienced only in the future. Take an instance mentioned earlier such as *Black Panther*, for example, which takes place in a contemporary world which has been imagined to be unencumbered by colonial interference and has often been credited with launched speculative fiction and afrofuturism into mainstream popular culture. Blackness is capacious across and through time. There exists, even, “retro Afrofuturists” such as Tim Fielder who stated, “There have always been gun-wielding, Jim Crow fighting Black women. Always. You just never saw them. Retro Afrofuturism is the filling in of those

⁶² Bruce, 2020

⁶³ [Clark, 2015](#)

⁶⁴ Imarisha, Walidah, & Brown, eds., 2015

voids through speculative fiction”.⁶⁵ As people continue to imagine expansive ideas of Blackness in the past, present, and beyond, Afrofuturism will remain an essential tool for liberation.

The ubiquity of this framework, however, is paired with scrutiny from proponents and skeptics alike. At the core of this scrutiny lies an argument that “mainstream” conceptions of Afrofuturism undermine the resilience and ductility of Blackness. More specifically, this particular critique problematizes Dery’s famous 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?”⁶⁶ The implications of this question have driven some scholars to seek to expand the way that we understand and think about what drives Black imagination. As Dery and others have put forth a Black imaginary that rose out of 1619, this conception of Afrofuturism arguably lacks room to imagine Blackness outside of the Black American experience or even one that is independent of a relationship to whiteness. However, these limiting factors have not served as Afrofuturism’s dereliction. Instead, it has moved scholars and organizers to continue to contribute a breadth of insights about the reach of Black imaginative power. For example, “Black speculative imagination” has become a sort of broad term for the lines of inquiry that speak to, investigate, and prop up creative Black thought and culture. Author Nnedi Okorafor, as an illustration, has sought to put forth work that is “rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West”.⁶⁷ These endeavors to understand the entirety of Black creativity, hope, and imagination prop up the work of this

⁶⁵ Fielder, 2018

⁶⁶ Dery, 1994

⁶⁷ [Wabuke, 2020](#)

dissertation as it seeks to give credence to the capaciousness of liberation prescience — a praxis undergirded by imagination and thoughts of futurity.

Further critique of Afrofuturism becomes relevant here as it acknowledges the fact that despite Afrofuturism's efforts to advance expansive ideas of Blackness, some folks have still been largely left out of the picture. This sentiment is expressed well in a piece by scholar Alondra Nelson — a proponent of Afrofuturism — that is worth quoting at length:

“Yet, in the zeal for a liberatory detour, Afrofuturism came to be more likely embodied by Sun Ra, George Clinton, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Ralph Ellison, and “The Brother from Another Planet” than by LaBelle, Ellen Gallagher, Layla Ali, Jewelle Gomez, or “Star Trek’s” Nyota Uhura. And, the queerness (in the broadest sense) of past-future visionaries such as Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, and Nalo Hopkinson, too often goes unappreciated as a central feature of Black futurist aesthetics. In other words, there are still “voices with other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come;” tuning in to these can both deepen and complicate how we think about Afrofuturism twenty years after Mark Dery coined the term.”⁶⁸

At stake here is a strong call to be mindful of the ways in which tools of oppression often find themselves leaking into even the liberatory visions that people seek to create for themselves. As a result, some scholars argue that we still often see queerness and gender expansiveness go underrepresented and underanalyzed in this sort of androcentric Afrofuturity.⁶⁹ To be clear, it is not that women and gender-expansive folx are absent from this subgenre of science fiction. In fact, some of the most cited Afrofuturist thinkers and creators are non-men — Octavia Butler, Janelle Monae, Missy Elliot, and Ytasha Womack immediately come to mind. The argument is not simply one of inclusivity. Rather, it is a call to ensure that when seeking to develop futures that are more equitable for *all* Black people, we

⁶⁸ Alondra Nelson, n.d., “A Feminist Critique of Afrofuturism”.

⁶⁹ Okorafor, n.d.; Eshun, 1998; [Hanchard, 1999](#)

must be mindful not to utilize the very structures that generated disjuncture in the first place. By this, I mean to say that this critique of Afrofuturism serves as a reminder about the pervasiveness of marginalizing systems of power and urges those invested in the work to think beyond this world in terms of what Blackness could be. While “utopias” may be unrealistic, there is still an entire cosmos of possibility for the capaciousness of Blackness to be imagined above and beyond what has ever been dreamed before. This cosmos of possibility is, ultimately, what this dissertation seeks to explore. In other words, this project seeks to explore what becomes possible when people pursue the lives that they want to live in the conditions in which they want to live them.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how the literature reviewed provides a comprehensive understanding of Black politics, encompassing an array of perspectives and lines of inquiry. Scholars have examined the complexities of Black political behavior, highlighting the diverse strategies utilized and challenges faced by Black communities in their pursuit of better futures. As it follows, this dissertation is taken up with the project of advancing social science’s understanding of 1) the relationship between how folks think about the future and how they engage politically, 2) how politics are forged on the margins, and 3) what folks activists mean when they say “we do this ‘til we free us”, and does so with a focus on young Black women and gender expansive activists and organizers. The literatures reviewed in this chapter serve as theoretical guideposts for the development of liberation prescience as praxis and for the undertaking of the project as a whole. The following chapters will demonstrate the relevance and salience of liberation prescience among young Black women and gender expansive folks in movement

as well as explore how these young folks are talking — in their own words — about their political commitments and dreams.

The question of how Black folks think politically is not a new one by any means. However, the culmination of literature explored in this chapter makes clear the need for not only deeper analyses, but new analyses as a younger generation of folks take helm of the political arena in the United States. By posing this generation as architects of freedom, this work aims to further the pivotal work that has been conducted within the fields of political science and Black politics. In the chapters that follow, I seek to shed light on Black futurity through interviews and focus groups with the very people who are constructing these futures. I continue this project by first exploring the elements of liberation prescience as praxis.

Chapter 3 - Theoretical Foundations of Liberation Prescience as Praxis

“This is the 21st century and we need to redefine r/evolution. This planet needs a people’s r/evolution. A humanist r/evolution. r/evolution is not about bloodshed or about going to the mountains and fighting. We will fight if we are forced to but the fundamental goal of r/evolution must be peace.

*We need a r/evolution of the mind. we need a r/evolution of the heart. We need a r/evolution of the spirit. The power of the people is stronger than any weapon. A people’s r/evolution can’t be stopped. **We need to be weapons of mass construction.**”*

- Assata Shakur

Introduction

As the field of American Politics concerns a system of political processes — more specifically, the study of power via analyses of elites, institutions, public policy, ideology, and activity — many academic studies approach it as an amalgam of puzzle pieces in need of being fitted together in order to be comprehended. This project, however, seeks to pose political processes as a tapestry, in that each thread interacts with another to form interstices that yield the realm of American politics. Weaving together like the threads of a tapestry, those who impact the political system are influenced by historical events, contemporary conditions, culture, and more. It is in this way that the importance of studying the entirety of this system becomes clear. What is American Politics without understanding the behavior of all of the people who make up the system? More pointedly, how can we understand American political life without understanding the actions, thoughts, and desires of those who are beginning to take the lead via elected offices, social movements, and the like? This chapter explores these initial questions by beginning to interrogate the theoretical underpinnings of who I argue make up the group taking helm — young Black women and GX folx in movement — and does so in an

effort to turn the eyes of social scientists to a group of political actors who are having a larger bearing on political systems, institutions, and even ideologies. As mentioned by a participant from Chicago, “We [Gen Z] are the trend-setters for real. Our voices are the ones that are starting to be the loudest. Some people don’t hear us yet, but they will. They have no choice. [laughs] We, quite literally, are the future”. As this group inherits a society built by those before them, how do they seek to alter it for themselves and for those to come after them? I offer the framework of liberation prescience — derived from the sentiments and ideas expressed by the participants of this study — as a way to characterize the political behavior and commitments of this group. Liberation prescience, as posed within this project, is an aspirational praxis of worldbuilding that characterizes how folks politically navigate the present moment in a way that seeks to bring about a different future. As Christopher Harris writes in *To Build a Black Future: The Radical Politics of Joy, Pain, and Care*, “This iteration of Black struggle...is an example of young Black people directly contesting the world system’s more salient norms by creating new opportunities for understanding Blackness, Black Politics and Black thought”.¹ He goes on to say, “[the] political culture is based on an interpretation of the way previous generations of Black social movement fared in providing a blueprint for the liberation of all black life...”.²

Identifying the ways in which Black folx have collectively struggled towards freedom is not a nascent project. There is a deep line of academic inquiry surrounding Black resistance and political behavior across various fields. As a result, we have been offered many frameworks, theories, and lenses through which to understand the political lives of marginalized people, some of which were explored in

¹ Harris, Christopher Paul. *To Build a Black Future: The Radical Politics of Joy, Pain, and Care* (Princeton (N.J.) etc.: Princeton University Press, 2023).

² Ibid.

the literature review of this dissertation. Some, such as afrofuturism and Black feminism, are particularly applicable as guideposts for this project. At their core, both of these frameworks explore the political demands and commitments of those invested in alternative realities and understand that “movements for social change depend upon a speculative imaginary”.³ As such, I do not seek to claim that the political engagement explored herein has gone completely unexcavated. Rather, my intervention here is to more deeply understand the political imaginations and commitments of a unique group of young Black activists and organizers and to interrogate the “this” when they say “we do this ‘til we free us”. More plainly, my inquiry is about the freedom dreams that exist amongst this group and how they came to be. I do not believe that there is a homogenous “Black yearning”, wherein all movement actors are seeking the same thing. By yearning, I simply mean a longing for something that is desired or being sought after that energizes people to pursue these wants. However, I do argue that there is some alignment in the cornerstones of what a “better” future might look like which is supported by notions expressed by some of the participants of this study. As an example, a participant of Focus Group 1 remarked:

“Earlier someone said something that made me think about the fact that one of the best things we can do when trying to find a way forward is remember that there are many places where we can find some consistency amongst what we want. Like...even when we don’t all have the same exact end goals, there are many points where we overlap. I think taking advantage of those overlapping things would help us”.

Further, in *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the 21st Century*, historian Barbara Ransby notes that:

³ Larkin, L. (2022). Afrofuturism. In *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Fiction 1980–2020* (eds P. O’Donnell, S.J. Burn and L. Larkin). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119431732.ecaf0229>

“Since a movement by definition is an eclectic mix of distinct forces moving in a coordinated direction, there is no “party line” or rigid ideology, but there are shared values, assumptions, and analyses, in addition to struggles over which of the narratives, theories, and demands will move to center stage” (96).⁴

These “shared values”, I believe, are rooted in the desire “to imagine, create, and shape realities rooted in solidarity, just transformation, connection, mutuality, and fierce hope for a world free from unnecessary suffering”.⁵ This dissertation intends to understand the political ideas and action that young Black women and GX activists and organizers take. By seeking to understand these actions, it is the goal of this project to further illuminate the cornerstones of the worlds that this segment — young Black women and GX activists and organizers — of the Trayvon Generation is imagining. In other words, I hope to add some texture to social science’s understanding of what young folks in movement are thinking about and where the commonalities lie. As such, I ask: how do young Black women and gender expansive activists think about achieving political equity, freedom, and liberation? How do they decide to engage in, navigate, and traverse the political realm in pursuit of better futures?

The “Trayvon Generation” is more than just the name of an age group. Rather, it is a way to recognize the culmination of a novel set of circumstances that has led to this generation becoming the most politically vocal in history and would be better characterized as a “political generation”.⁶ Scholar Christopher Harris writes:

⁴ Ransby, 2018.

⁵ Acu, Chiara [@chiara.acu]. “*To imagine, create, and shape realities rooted in solidarity, just transformation, connection, mutuality, and fierce hope for a world free* [photograph]”. July 11, 2023. Instagram.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CukK7zILgjs/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==>

⁶ Parker, Kim. “Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues.” Pew Research Center, 17 Jan. 2019, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/.

“...a generation is more than a group of individuals born within a predefined range of dates. Generations are “social institutions of time” or, better still, a “community of experience”, prompted by instances when historically contingent circumstances collude to create a broad, if heterogenous, identity”.⁷

The Trayvon Generation is certainly a political generation. Though Millennials and Gen Z have distinct differences that make them different from one another and from previous generations, they do share similarities that I argue have a bearing on their political behavior. The existence of these similarities is noticed by some within this group, such as Devin, who said, “I am part of Gen Z and my siblings are Millennials. Growing up, I felt really different from them. But as I got older, I realized that we share a lot of views about things that matter. I’m talking about like politics and things like that. I can’t fully say what sort of futures my brothers think about, but I do know that we care about a lot of the same things”. Further, amongst many other things, this group was the first to experience adolescence in a post 9/11 world and also endured the 2008 Great Recession and are still enduring the COVID-19 Pandemic — in fact, part of this generation has also colloquially been called “zoomers”, as many attended and completed school through Zoom classes.⁸ This was also the first generation to be born into a world without the internet and then grow into one where it is not uncommon to have a miniature computer in your pocket or on your wrist. In many ways, technological advances have changed the way that they see the world. In comparison to older generations, there exists not only increased access to information, but an increased ability to share and express one’s thoughts and experiences with others. This becomes particularly salient for liberation prescience, as it is not the political engagement that is new, but that some of the ways in which it is expressed —namely, social

⁷ Harris, 2023

⁸ “Words We’re Watching: ‘Zoomer’”. *Merriam-Webster*. October 2021.

media — is new. These novel modalities — such as TikTok and Threads — are worthy of study as they significantly impact the political landscape of the United States and carry meaning for organizing and movement work. It is, then, not that prescience is nascent, but that new technologies have created space for this prescience to be motivated by different things and employed in novel ways.

These are, by no means, the only novel things about this generation. However, these characteristics are particularly salient as they speak to the role that the access to technology has had on the formation and mobilization of political consciousness. The world in which this generation has come of age has been largely shaped by national crises, hypervisible state-sanctioned violence, and access to a wealth of both information and misinformation. The political consciousness of the Trayvon Generation is informed by more events, institutions, technologies, and power dynamics than can be named in this project. However, for the individuals this study focuses on, many developed a political spirit due to the hypervisibility of the disposability of Black and Brown lives — starting with Trayvon Martin.

There is something particularly virulent about the fact that this generation grew up with video and photo evidence of their precarity right in their pockets. For those who had a different — or no — particular moment of politicization that they recognize, their political consciousness and engagement is still influenced by the web of marginality that stems from the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, which is engrained in almost — if not all — aspects of life.⁹ Michaela, a 28 year old from the Bay Area shared a striking observation as they noted, “People who I am in community with...I think we actually occupy a very peculiar space. On one hand, there are so many very public instances of Black people

⁹ hooks, bell. (1984). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

being murdered for no reason that really causes a lot of people to mobilize. But I also think a lot of people are, unfortunately, very desensitized. However, I don't think it necessarily makes them any less politically involved. Whether you've seen one or one hundred videos of your people being killed...that is going to do something to you". As it follows, this dissertation, argues that this group's political consciousness is, in part, a product of their [socio-political] environment. This consciousness and its resulting commitments are the focus of this dissertation. This study was born out of my curiosity surrounding the collective aspects of movement work and its centrality in effecting social change. The role of groups and organizations has been made clear by many scholars.¹⁰ However, what does it mean for a movement actor to navigate politics as both an individual while also thinking about what it might mean for their community? At the core of this question lies an understanding of the processes that occur when individuals make political decisions and decide how and when to act. Further, as people yearn and have things that they want, crave, and desire, how do they reach them? Though individuals may find kinship through shared history and ancestral knowledge, they do not all employ that knowledge through the same means. In other words, I do not seek to argue that all marginalized individuals practice liberation prescience in the same manner, as finding relationships in a shared history does not necessarily mean that it awakens the same aspirations. I simply mean that those who operate from similar positions of marginality have different ways of navigating the present and future and that those ways have meaningful influences on the political realm. Though it holds an aspect of futurity, prescience, as understood herein, is not a supernatural foretelling ability. Rather, it is the culmination of knowledge, analysis, and critical thinking that gives individuals the ability to form their

¹⁰ Olson, 1965; McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984; Tilly, 1993; Tarrow, 1998

own ways of knowing. As experts of their own experiences that have an understanding of social and political structures, folx often practice prescience by participating in actions that they believe will help form the world that they believe is possible — the ensemble of those practices is understood here as liberation prescience.¹¹ This does not mean that every detail within an individual's freedom dream is absolute truth, as people's desires and yearning often shift. However, it does reflect a belief that, at least to some extent, better conditions can prevail.

While the use and application of theory within movement building is indispensable, it is carried further with action. This is, by definition, praxis which is understood to be the practical application of a theory or belief. It calls for putting concepts into action and is a process of applying theoretical knowledge to address real-world issues.¹² As it follows, liberation prescience is praxis as it takes the epistemologies forged by thinking otherwise and puts them into practice through political action. In other words, liberation prescience turns dreams into reality as it moves political ideas into political actions. This, then, is why I situate the population of this study as architects of freedom. As they build off of previous concepts and develop new ones, they work alongside others to then bring forth a reality that they believe is more functionally sound than what currently exists. While it might be true that humans, in general, often seek to improve their condition, it is particularly salient for marginalized communities who often feel an insatiable need to do so in order to secure better prospects for their safety, survival, and thriving. It is, then, not about having better conditions simply for the sake of it, but for the purpose of building what they can in order to ensure their survival and the survival of

¹¹ This will be explored in the following chapter.

¹² "praxis." Merriam-Webster.com. <https://www.merriam-webster.com>

generations to come. The practical application of liberation prescience is explored in the following chapter.

Liberation Prescience as Theory

Liberation — and many Black people's conception of it — is a complex and circuitous project. What I mean to say here is that the possibilities for what ideas about and images of liberation might look like are boundless. As the pursuit of liberation is nonlinear and anfractuous, then it must be the case that the journeys that follow must be as well. In common public discourse, freedom is too often conceptualized as a dichotomous state of being — as some understand it, one is either free or not free. This binary analysis is insufficient as it lacks an understanding of the various intersections of unfreedom paired with the idea that liberation is a constant pursuit. More plainly, there is no universal condition of unfreedom. As it follows, I posit that conceptions of freedom must also exist in more than one form. With these conceptions of freedom come ideas about how to effectuate them. These ideas and pursuits to experience freedom are part of what I've called liberation prescience. In this dissertation, prescience refers to a sort of political precognition that endows individuals with the penchant to think and create possibilities of freedom beyond the now. Prescience is not a kind of crystal ball power that allows someone to concretely know the events of the future. Rather, it ought to be more accurately understood as a practice of thinking otherwise about what the world could be and taking steps to build it. In other words, liberation prescience is an aspirational and epistemological ideology of freedom that informs how people engage in the collective project of imagining and manufacturing a new world in which all people might experience freedom. I define it in this manner for several reasons. First, liberation prescience is epistemological due to the fact that it is undergirded

by a questioning of why we value the things (i.e. institutions, knowledge, systems, etc.) that we do. It is aspirational in that its practices are meant to be successful in bringing about a new social order wherein folx have the resources and autonomy to live the lives that they desire. Further, I posit that those who engage in this type of practice do so in order to not only “be free”, but to experience freedom.

A distinction must be made here as this project understands the former — being free — as a stagnant state and the latter — experiencing freedom — as a kind of cumulative experience of unrestraint. To explain further, this project understands “being free” as a condition that is dictated by outside forces (such as the government) and is not rooted in individual or collective autonomy. To exemplify this, take for example the touting of the United States as “The Land of the Free” and as a nation wherein individuals are endowed with the rights of “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”.¹³ These claims, while penned on the governing documents of this country, are not executed efficiently in practice. In other words, the right to liberty as stated in the Declaration of Independence is not a right that has been unequivocally afforded to all people — if it were, the questions posed in this dissertation would not need to be asked. Citizens of the United States, on paper, are understood to “be free” solely because it has been proclaimed as true. It is a condition that is said to exist, but that many do not actually experience. This makes evident the importance of *experiencing* freedom, whereby individuals and communities wrest the ability to define freedom and have more autonomy and agency over what their liberty looks like. In this context, freedom is not something that is claimed to exist by outside forces, but is defined by those who seek to experience it.

¹³ Key, Francis Scott, 1779-1843. “The Star Spangled Banner.” Garden City, N. Y. :Doubleday, Doran & company, 1942.; U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription.”

To experience something is to have one's emotions and sensations stimulated by engaging in activities, choices, or circumstances that align with their values, desires, and autonomy.¹⁴ From this perspective, experiencing freedom is a cumulative process of having one's aspirations and desires affirmed. These future perceptions and actions continue to shape the world in which folx live and how they might experience freedom. I say "might" here as the future is uncertain and, in some senses, unstable as even the things that folx desire may change.¹⁵ However, the actions and conditions of the past and present, inevitably, do shape the future in some way. For the activists and organizers of today to think "if only" is to influence the world that their future loved ones will one day inhabit. As liberation prescience is a complex politics of world-building and futurity, I posit that it is both ancestral and prophetic as those who practice it look back at future generations, look to one another, and look forward to generations to come. It is, then, about who folx *have been*, who they *are*, and who they *could be*.

To be connected to the past, present, and future is to understand the importance of continuity — and often, discontinuity — as it transcends different spaces in time. It is to recognize how past ideas, experiences, and events have shaped the present and how the choices made and ideas formulated in the present can influence what happens in the future. Even further, it is to comprehend the potential of the present. The past was, at some point, the present; the future will be, at some point, the present. This is, namely, one of the reasons that this project is fixated on current political behavior. Focusing in on the "now" lends an extended look into and discernment of the past and the future. What is

¹⁴ According to the Macmillan Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

¹⁵ I say unstable here because an individual's thoughts about the future or even about what they want can be influenced and changed at any moment. Therefore, what they pursue may also be impacted. Also "what's possible" often shifts and changes, potentially creating better outcomes for folks in the present and future.

productive about the present is that there is always more to come, and it is within this “more” that models of possibility continue to be realized. These possibility models are what open the space for alternative futures to be birthed out of thinking otherwise and daring to challenge what the world has already built. In this context, the significance of temporality is derived from Sankofa, an African tradition that is well-known in movement spaces. This tradition can be understood, in simple terms, as reaching back to knowledge gained in the past and bringing it into the present in order to make progress. It calls for the reflection of past experiences, retrieval of valuable lessons and knowledge, and using them to inform and shape actions in the present and, therefore, the future. After translation, Sankofa means “go back and get it”.¹⁶ What, then, are the activists and organizers of today going back to get? Further, what are they creating today that their descendants will one day go back and get? These questions lie at the heart of this project.

The centrality of Sankofa within this project is not intended to imply that progress or change happens only linearly, but rather that freedom dreams have a way of passing through time as they are perpetually conceived of and constructed. In other words, cultures often preserve traditions, knowledge, and values, which are passed down through generations. Through this frame of reference, being connected to the past means recognizing and appreciating these historical roots. Moreover, it involves adapting and evolving these cultural elements to the temporal demands of the present while also considering how it might bring about the future you seek to build. Social and political change is often influenced by historical events and decisions. By recognizing these influences, those in movement

¹⁶ Kwabena, Nana. “Sankofa.” Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, 15 Sept. 2020, www.adinkrasymbols.org/symbols/sankofa/.

can make informed decisions in the present that aim for their idea of a better future. An interaction between two focus group participants highlights this very influence:

Participant 1: “Much of what we...well, I will speak for myself...much of what I do comes from those who did it before me.”

Participant 2: “Definitely. We have to rework some things but the foundation of how we mobilize was largely built by people before us.”

Participant 1: “Yeah, I like to think of it as little gifts that they left for us.”

Participant 2: “Agreed. It’s sort of like they passed a torch and we have to keep it lit until we pass it too.”

Liberation prescience is, undoubtedly, rooted in this inextricability of past, present, and future as those in movement have, do, and will look back over their shoulders in an effort to bring new horizons.

Important to note here is that it is not solely the history or knowledge that is to be revered within these practices, but also those who *hold* the knowledge. That is to say, individuals who utilize repertoires from the past serve as conduits in the construction of a better present and future. This is yet another reason why this project poses young people in movement as architects of freedom. This is true in the sense that as holders and practitioners of past knowledge, they then become vessels that wield the *weapons of mass construction* for the future.

As it follows, I believe that these architects are in pursuit of a world in which they can define what their freedom feels like. It is in this way that I situate liberation prescience as the *operationalization* of Afrofuturism, insofar as it puts into practice building the alternate realities that have been imagined. Afrofuturism often imagines alternative futures or reimagines history through a

lens that centers Black thriving; liberation prescience seeks to take this a step further by putting action behind these reimaginings. I characterize liberation prescience as epistemological in that it uses counter-normative methods and knowledge to investigate and answer questions. This is explained well by Patricia Hill Collins as she states, “[e]pistemology constitutes an overarching theory of knowledge. It investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or *why* we believe what we believe to be true”.¹⁷

She goes on to say:

“In contrast to epistemologies, paradigms encompass interpretive frameworks such as intersectionality that are used to explain social phenomena. Methodology refers to the broad principles of how to conduct research and how interpretive paradigms are to be applied. The level of epistemology is important because it determines which questions merit investigation, which interpretive frameworks will be used to analyze findings, and to what use any ensuing knowledge will be put”.¹⁸

Liberation prescience as praxis, then, is epistemological as it permits those who practice it the ability to discern what in society should be challenged, why it must be so, which questions “merit investigation”, and “which interpretive frameworks will be used to analyze findings”. This, I posit, is what gives liberation prescience a sense of social and political alchemy. I choose “alchemy” here as it refers to a “seemingly marginal process of transformation, creation, or combination”.¹⁹ Again, liberation prescience is not some form of magic, but does have an air of political conjuring as it seeks to bring out what does not yet exist, but what might be practiced into existence.

As argued in the introduction, the praxis of liberation prescience is undergirded by the Black Radical Tradition and finds its roots in afrofuturist projects.²⁰ I do not say this to mean that all in

¹⁷ Collins, 1990

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “alchemy” Merriam-Webster.com. <https://www.merriam-webster.com>

²⁰ Robinson, 1983; Butler, 1993; Kelley, 2003; Ransby, 2018; Carruthers, 2018

pursuit of a different world would consider themselves to be “radical” as having shared identities alone does not inherently generate alignment, as I noted earlier. However, I simply mean that there is a long-standing and well-documented practice of resistance and a tendency to think about futurity amongst Black people. The life of this tradition has birthed a repertoire of political action from which today’s organizers still pull from and contribute to. This legacy has been deemed the Black Radical Tradition and it is the task of this project to more fervently uncover what actions that young Black women and GX activists and organizers are pulling from and contributing to this repertoire.

Understanding the semantics of liberation prescience is indispensable for understanding it as praxis. Firstly, I reiterate that the pursuit of liberation is sinuous. Definitions found within dictionaries point to liberation as release or a state of being made free. The concept of freedom is also particularly nebulous. As such, this project puts forth an overall understanding of liberation as the ability to exist differently and without overwhelming restraint. In other words, it is not simply a status of freedom. It is about the unmitigated ability to have one’s needs met in a way that is protected from systematic social, political, and economic plight. It does not mean that inequity, violence, and injustice do not exist. Instead, it might mean that one’s proximity to political power would not disparately inform their lived experience. Liberation prescience as a concept does not guarantee worlds in which disparity does not exist. Rather, liberation prescience endows individuals with the aptitude to see and work toward a society within which they have autonomy over what is possible and who they can be. Though it is often discussed as a “psychic” phenomenon, this project instead poses prescience as a precognitive way of *believing* that influences political commitments and behaviors presently. This practice of believing, while not tangible, still carries meaning. After all, everything that is now proven as “science” was once

philosophy or theory. Furthermore, those who practice liberation prescience engage in political activity that they presume will bring about the conditions that they believe are possible. Liberation prescience, then, is defined as a praxis practiced by particular communities that gives way to acting and thinking in a manner that reflects a belief that the ability to exist differently is possible.

To reiterate a previous point, I do not seek to argue that this liberatory consciousness is something that has gone unexplored. Instead, I hope to shed light on how it manifests amongst a particular set of people and to further expand our understanding of how liberation prescience might influence the political behavior and commitments of a distinct group of actors. As such, I've situated liberation prescience as the operationalization of afrofuturism in a way that I believe brings a more clear view of the way that young Black women and GX folx in movement understand, make sense of, and challenge the ever-changing world around them. The desire to have a deeper understanding of this group is further motivated by my previous argument that some concepts such as prefigurative politics are insufficient to truly characterize the life of liberation prescience. This is not to say that liberation prescience is entirely separate from prefigurative politics, but to pose it as an extension.

In other words, liberation prescience can be thought of as a kind of prefigurative politics that is poised to adequately understand the political lives of those who lie on the margins of the margins. Both based on precognition, the framework of liberation prescience describes a way of acting in which those who practice it believe they can bring about a better future. These actions arise when groups become disenfranchised by existing political and social institutions and decide to pursue alternative structures that are more conducive to a world in which they want to exist. It is important to note that prefigurative politics — in the way that it has been theorized — stops here, and to characterize

liberation prescience simply as a set of actions would be insufficient. In its entirety, liberation prescience is something that folks practice and, in turn, they adhere to particular political actions and beliefs.

Since liberation prescience is something that individuals and groups practice, it manifests across many arenas. More pointedly, I've discussed the "work" of liberation prescience so far as political acts of resistance. While acts such as not voting or protests often come to mind, it spans much further than that. Resistance can be seen through art, film, dance, poetry, and other mediums. In fact, I believe that it can manifest in every form of expression. If liberation prescience can inform the way that an individual decides to protest, then it can certainly inform the words that one decides to put on a page or the moments one decides to photograph. Take, for example, the song "Alright" penned by rapper Kendrick Lamar. Lamar's lyrics, "Nigga, we gon' be alright, Nigga, we gon' be alright, We gon' be alright, Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright" is often used as a chant within Black-led movement spaces as a sort of proclamation of hope and declaration that more favorable conditions are possible. Lamar is only one of many artists whose art is utilized by movement actors to convey sentiments of resistance and yearning.

Liberation Prescience in Art

Film, poetry, music, and fashion are only a few mediums through which artists utilize prolific ways to assert their experiences and worldview. Sounds such as the strokes of a paintbrush, the clacking of a keyboard, and the hum of a film reel each illustrate art as expressions of human creation and imagination. The ubiquity, then, of the use of art as articulations of liberation prescience should come as no surprise. When asked whether she uses art as an organizing tool, Kell, an interview participant,

stated, “In a way, yes. It is an important part of my self-care, and, therefore, an important part of my organizing. Without a way to express myself, I am nothing. I use art to do that. Without it, I wouldn’t have the capacity to organize in the ways that I do”. Black art, in particular, has been and is known as a space wherein articulations of the Black experience are made legible through various channels. This can be traced to nearly any period of Black experience as there is an immense supply of stories about Black expression, creation, survival, and resistance. Take, for example, the use of cornrows by enslaved Africans. Though it holds cultural significance as a hairstyle, it was then also used as a means of resistance when other methods were not possible.²¹ These sorts of expressions have continued to matriculate into contemporary Black spaces as the Black experience has evolved. As a more recent example, there exists an argument that the Marvel film *Black Panther* launched a mainstream afrofuturist renaissance. While it is beyond the scope of this project to engage in that argument, I do believe that there is a wealth of afrofuturist art — both within and outside of the mainstream — that showcases alternative worlds and futures. I think here of Eve Ewing’s “I Saw Emmett Till This Week at the Grocery Store” in which she poses an alternative world in which Emmett Till had not been murdered:

“looking over the plums, one by one
lifting each to his eyes and
turning it slowly, a little earth,
checking the smooth skin for pockmarks
and rot, or signs of unkind days or people,
then sliding them gently into the plastic”.²²

²¹ Dash, Paul. (2006). Black Hair Culture, Politics and Change. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 10(1), 27–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110500173183>

²² Ewing, Eve. “I Saw Emmett Till This Week at the Grocery Store.” *Poets.Org*, Academy of American Poets, 16 May 2019, poets.org/poem/i-saw-emmett-till-week-grocery-store.

I am struck here by the mundane nature of this encounter. In this other world, Emmett Till was not doing anything particularly fascinating; he was simply existing. He would have been 77 years old at the time that this poem was published; a full life that could, in a different world, have been lived. I imagine that many folx think and dream of worlds such as these; worlds in which their loved ones could be free even just to enjoy the mundane parts of life. I highlight this here to emphasize that freedom dreams — a kind of starting point to the practice of liberation prescience — don't always end or begin with “burning everything down”.²³ It is often just about the posturing of an expansive existence, one in which all people are free to be who they are, to experience joy, and to partake in the mundane. These architects of freedom often yearn for something that many take for granted — the ability to just be.

Octavia Butler, George Clinton, Janelle Monae, and Ryan Coogler are just a few names that have become prominent within “afrofuturist” art. However, part of the beauty of afrofuturism is that it does not require a notable filmmaker or prominent author to produce these stories. As masters of their own experiences, Black people regularly find ways to communicate their visions and dreams. Considering the Trayvon Generation's high levels of interaction with art and digital media, I believe that these mediums are particularly paramount for the expression of their political endeavors. As media and art (e.g. social media, film, music, poetry, fashion) have become notable outlets for folx who have grown up within the past 25 years, many of us have seen liberation prescience cross our screens in some way. Though these movement actors — including those this study focuses on — may not have experienced true freedom yet, their desire to do so seeps from their own imagination and expression.

²³ I note here that freedom dreams are a starting point to liberation prescience as movement actors must first *dream* up what they desire before they pursue it. It is in this way that freedom dreams serve as moments of conception, after which liberation prescience can then be practiced.

The Pursuit of Improvement

The objective and utility of this work is to more adeptly understand and visualize the dreamspace — merely an abstract space wherein dreams and desires exist — of young Black women and GX folx in movement as well as to understand the relationship between their dreams and their actions. To interrogate these dreams and desires is to uncover their yearnings. Though I selected this group because I believe that they are invested in worldbuilding in novel ways, I do not believe that their dreams are identical to one another or that they expect the same level of world “betterment”. When I say that these people are in pursuit of a better world, what does “better” look like to them? What does it mean for something to be better? Can a world be better for one person but not another? These are all questions that are explored in this project. While posing these set of actors as chief architects of freedom, it is essential to remember that each individual likely has their own blueprint. This fact is what further justified the desire and need to conduct focus groups in addition to interviews. As individuals serve as their own cartographers, how do they work as a collective to find alignment and a way forward? In an era of movement activity — the Movement for Black Lives — that largely rejects notions of individualism, in what ways do the worlds of these young activists at the center of my research overlap?

I would like to return to this notion of building better worlds. Dictionary definitions of “better” are quite unfulfilling. They, in sum, define “better” as improving something to a superior degree or making something more desirable.²⁴ I find that these common definitions leave more questions than answers. What is “superior”? What does it mean to be “more desirable”? This lack of

²⁴ “better” Merriam-Webster.com. <https://www.merriam-webster.com>

clarity speaks further to the need to more deeply understand what this group means when they say they believe that other worlds could be better. I wonder, then, if people's conceptions of "betterness" are in comparison to our current world and if achieving any degree of improvement is sufficient or if there exists a certain threshold. It is for these reasons that this project seeks to understand *what* they are in pursuit of and *how*. To say that they want an improved world is insufficient. This project fills this gap as it explores the nuances of "betterment" and is an excavation of the many ways it can look. As understood here, to want "better" is to recognize the necessity for change and to want the emergence of something new. Further, what I seek to understand here is what that "something new" might be, especially as achieving something "better" largely depends on from where you begin. For instance what, to the incarcerated, the poor, or the housing insecure, makes for a better world? Is that world in alignment with one that might be better for others? How do those in movement reconcile these potential cleavages?

Liberation prescience extends beyond just what these young folx imagine. It is also about how they reckon with and navigate this current historical moment. For instance, perhaps some of these organizers imagine a world without a two-party electoral system that governs society. Yet, they may currently engage in voting and other aspects of electoral politics because they believe that it is an essential part of working towards the world they want to come to fruition. Additionally, maybe some of these folx imagine worlds without police forces but currently support policing as it is, as a form of safety and "crime prevention". This is all to say that I propose that the things floating in the imaginations of this group may often be at odds with how they currently navigate their day to day lives. As such, this project seeks to understand how these activists and organizers reckon with their

freedom dreams while living outside of those dreams. With their minds planted in a dreamspace yet their material bodies tethered to reality, how do these young folks continue to use yearning as a technology of freedom?

Often, the mention of dreamspaces evokes images of utopias or heavens. However, these are not the concepts I mean to illustrate when discussing the dreamscapes of liberation prescience. To assert that these young movement actors are in pursuit of utopia is to imply that they are chasing abstract imaginations of perfection. In other words, this project does not seek to characterize this community as idle daydreamers who naively yearn for perfection and moral purity. An important delineation is that the dreams of these actors are not forever cast away as perpetually unrealizable dreams or chimera. Rather, they are prophetic in nature as those who dream them believe that they can one day be reality. Elizabeth Alexander summarizes this well as she states: “free in this context doesn’t just mean having accomplished the seemingly impossible. It doesn’t just mean being outspoken. It means, to borrow from Langston Hughes, free within ourselves but in a way that is discernible and legible to our community”.²⁵ As it follows, I pose these dreamers as having more than fleeting mental images. They, instead, use dreaming as a form of planning to redefine the bounds of society.²⁶ These actors, then, are not just dream chasers. They are dream makers as they mobilize to make real what they have prophesied. Though I reject that they are chasing “heavens”, they are indeed questing for a sort of afterlife of the world as is. This, then, is what undergirds the productivity of liberation prescience and qualifies it as praxis rather than just theory.

²⁵ Alexander, 2022

²⁶ Steinem, Gloria. “Dreaming, after All, Is a Form of Planning.” Gloria Steinem, www.gloriasteinem.com/news.

As previously stated, this project understands prescience as a sort of intuitive insight. This often allows a discernment of ontological truths and an ability to challenge what is otherwise accepted as “normal”. More specifically, particular life experiences can endow individuals with the ability and desire to challenge the world as they currently experience it. These challenges lead to the creation of a realm of alternative possibilities for how the world could be. To reiterate a previous point, prescience is not inherently undergirded by an alignment with conventional “higher powers” and does not operate “like magic”. It is, instead, a way to mobilize epistemologies to re-envision and reimagine what the truths of the world could be. Since Black people have been relegated as minorities or “others”, there is a vast tradition within the Black American experience of challenging the norms of society. These challenges hinge upon connections between past, present, and future. This temporal complexity gives credence to a characterization of those in movement as precognitive, as their traversal to new worlds is contingent upon what they know about the past and what they know the future can be.

Black Queer Feminism as a Guidepost

This dissertation is, I argue, a Black Queer Feminist project. Here, one should understand the work of Black Queer Feminism as centering the experiences of the most marginalized people of society and constructing spaces where normative power structures lose their oppressive and hierarchical power in order to dismantle systems of domination. This project further understands Black Queer Feminism as a political praxis that operationalizes the lens of intersectionality. To operationalize intersectionality in this context would mean centering vulnerable groups that are understood to lie the furthest away from normative or state political power and protection. Black Queer Feminism is a framework rooted in theoretical and practical applications. The ideological underpinning of Black Queer Feminism can

largely be understood by the idea of “radicalism”. Here, the word radical should be understood with regard to its Latin origin. Radical is derived from the Latin adjective *radicalis* which translates to “of or relating to a root”. The base word here is *radix*, a Latin term meaning “fundamental” or “going to the origin”.²⁷ As it follows, Black Queer Feminism is a praxis that concerns itself with constructively engaging the fundamental root of social ills while centering those who are rendered most vulnerable by it.

This dissertation, therefore, is framed as an on-going task. It is important to note that this is certainly not a nascent project as Black feminist scholars and activists have engaged with many of these same ideas. Black feminism has endured many iterations, each tailored to the specificities of its temporal emergence. In essence, each wave of feminism brings a renewed emphasis that is informed by and representative of a particular social context. Centered around collective action and based in collective struggle, Black Queer Feminism occupies the transformational space of radical politics.²⁸ A Black Queer Feminist praxis is an inherently political project as it explicitly seeks to redefine hegemonic notions of “who gets what, when, and why”. Applying a Black Queer Feminist lens underscores the labor of liberation prescience as “the project of both dreaming and acting as if another world is possible” wherein the aforementioned hegemonic notions are often contested.²⁹

I make the decision to view liberation prescience through a lens of Black Queer Feminism as I seek to tether my analyses to the experiences of those who understand and are impacted by inextricable power structures — such as racism, cis-heteronormativity, and ableism — that enact a particular kind

²⁷ According to the Douglas Harper Etymology dictionary.

²⁸ Cohen, 1999

²⁹ Meiners, 2021

of violence that leads to marginality. This is not to say that other “feminisms” are ill-suited as analytical lenses. Rather, I find Black Queer Feminism to be a praxis through which this work can engage in the depths that it needs. If Black Queer Feminism is the lens here, then we can use it to view the many forms that liberation prescience takes. As social movements and the political arena are constantly being reshaped, it is essential to have a lens to which to return to ensure that the experiences on the outside continue to be funneled to the middle. It is in this way that I use Black Queer Feminism to conduct research in a manner that does not create corners, but that surveys them in an attempt to smooth them out and pull folx to the center.

Conclusion

The precarious social positionality of Black women and gender expansive folx does not merely shape their modes of political participation. In fact, it often informs a kind of political *disengagement* in that it exists very much in opposition to normative spaces and might be better understood as “infrapolitics”, a concept that was explored in the literature review.³⁰ Infrapolitics is a framework used to describe actions and confrontations that inform political movements.³¹ More specifically, “[m]ost of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in the overt collective defiance of power holders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites”.³² As it follows, infrapolitics is often used to describe the behavior of marginalized groups that is not traditionally understood as political, such as supporting political parties. Without an infrapolitical perspective, social science runs the risk of assuming that marginal groups lack a legible

³⁰ By *disengagement*, I am referring to the political actions that fall outside of what is considered “traditional” civic engagement and often exist extrasystemically.

³¹ Scott, 1985

³² Ibid.

political spirit.³³ This study of liberation prescience intentionally interrogates this infrapolitical space and seeks to ensure that the political ideologies of those marked as “other” are understood as political. With its prioritization of non-normative politics, this study of liberation prescience explores this “vast territory between” defiance and compliance.³⁴

Many “traditional” studies within social science often engage with a narrow and uni-directional understanding of how ideology impacts our interactions with the current state of the world.³⁵ In other words, contemporary research surrounding political behavior has a limited scope as it often explicates the ways in which people understand past or present political affairs. This project, however, seeks to expand this scope and understand the complex relationship between past, present, and future. At this study’s core lies a preoccupation with the liberatory visions of young marginalized Black people who hope for a better world to come.³⁶ At stake is an understanding of the ways in which the political commitments (e.g. voting, organizing) of Black women and GX activists are shaped by their unique social positionality. The force of this work is to interrogate the space in which answers to the question of “what’s next?” exists. This ontological question tugs at the political *ought* and explores what folx think can and should exist. As “the category of woman as a political category, perpetually and almost pathologically, centers white cisgender (heterosexual) women”, this Black Queer Feminist work will center the marginalized experiences of young Black women and GX activists and organizers to contribute an analysis of the ways in which particular social nexuses (i.e. race, gender identity, sexuality,

³³ Scott, 1985; Kelley, 1994; Cohen, 2004

³⁴ Scott, 1985

³⁵ Achen, 1975; Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, 2008; Chong and Druckman, 2007

³⁶ Here, I use Mariame Kaba’s orientation to understand hope as a discipline that must be practiced daily (Sonenstein, B. and Wilson, K., 2018. *Hope Is A Discipline* feat. *Mariame Kaba*. Beyond Prisons.)

etc.) influence how those on the margins navigate political commitments in order to carve their path to liberation.³⁷

This project is animated and upheld by the Black Queer Feminist practice of centering the most marginalized. In doing so, I situate Black organizers of the Trayvon Generation who identify as women and/or gender-expansive as architects of freedom who wield weapons of mass construction. As utilizers of alternative modes of knowledge production and worldmaking, it is essential that social scientists continue to expand our understanding of these groups. It is for this reason that I center these activists and organizers, as I seek to bolster and broaden the structures through which we understand the political lives of young Black people in movement. As a group that I later show to be thinking often about futurity, political science must remain attentive to the ever-evolving paths to liberation that are being carved, as they continue to shape the political arena. The existing knowledge about the political commitments of this group is not as deep as that of other groups. I fill this lacuna by providing a new framework — liberation prescience — with which to understand the way that this group impacts and is impacted by the social, political, and economic order of the United States. By locating this project within this particular group, I make clear the need for social scientists to center the experiences of the most vulnerable and least protected people in our society.

Through the posturing of liberation prescience as an aspirational praxis of worldbuilding, I make evident the spectrum of political commitments and behavior that exist amongst those who serve as cartographers of new lands. I uphold liberation prescience as an impetus for political possibility and explore it here in the context of those who practice it within movement work. In the chapter that

³⁷ Green and Bey, 2017

follows, I turn to interviews and focus groups to ground my claims and to provide real-world examples of the ways that young Black women and GX organizers are “thinking otherwise”.³⁸ As the previous chapter explored the existing literature about the political commitments of this group to identify where knowledge is lacking, the remainder of the project seeks to situate my project as one that broadens our knowledge about this line of inquiry.

This dissertation argues that some marginalized people *practice* liberation prescience, which then informs what they believe and *do*. As it follows, I posit that liberation prescience is also about how folx navigate the here and now; it is not *solely* pointed towards the future in the way that prefigurative politics is. To restate the goal of this project, I seek to understand the relationship between how this group thinks about the future and how they act. This chapter has outlined the theoretical underpinnings of this framework. The following chapter, then, takes us from theory to praxis as it explores the words, actions, thoughts, and beliefs of the population of this study. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, I think with and alongside activists and organizers about how they seek to traverse this world in pursuit of another. As this chapter has established the theory of liberation praxis and how it informs behavior, the next chapter dives into the “action” of the praxis, particularly by establishing pillars of commonality that exist amongst the freedom dreams of these young people in movement. In other words, the following chapter stands to establish some commonalities that exist amongst a group of folx who are yearning for a spectrum of “better tomorrows”. When their desires and reality are at odds with one another, how do these organizers navigate the political realm? Many of

³⁸ I have previously used the phrase “thinking otherwise” to refer to the process of thinking and acting through liberation prescience.

these organizers desire things that do not yet exist or have ceased to exist. How, then, do they make political decisions within a societal structure that may or may not support their freedom dreams? The answers to these questions are explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 - Architects of Freedom: Understanding Perceptions of Futurity and Behavior

“Audre Lorde teaches us that our silence will not provide protection. Speaking our truths helps us imagine and create the world we want to live in, despite systems of oppression that tell us that we are not enough.”

- Charlene Carruthers

“Don’t believe the lie that energy given toward one liberation cause is energy taken from another liberation cause. Every wound is connected. And we won’t settle for partial healing.”

- Cole Arthur Riley

Introduction

As it is concerned with centering the experiences, voices, and knowledge of the research participants, this dissertation implements a qualitative methods approach. As discussed in the introduction, this project understands a population of movement actors — young Black women and gender expansive folx — as architects of freedom and, as such, they are further understood to be co-creators and thought partners of the knowledge brought forth within this dissertation. Often, the norms of “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal” knowledge production lead us to believe that there are only single truths and that these truths emerge only from particular places.¹ The methodological approach utilized herein challenges these assumptions as it explores those on the margins as beacons of knowledge that hold a spectrum of truths and realities. By remaining open to multiple ways of knowing and by desiring to understand various modes of knowledge production, this project seeks to make clear what happens when researchers push the boundaries of what is often considered “standard practice” within a field. With this ethos in mind, this project sets out to answer: how do young Black activists and organizers think about liberation and futurity? How do they decide to engage in, navigate,

¹ hooks, 1984

and traverse the political realm? Cumulatively, this chapter deepens political science's understanding of the politics forged on the margins and why it is salient within the field, and does so via the voices of those who are doing the work.

Historically, the field of political science has not been the most open or best equipped to explore Black life with breadth and depth. In other words, the priorities of the field have, traditionally, treated the intersection of race and politics as an offshoot of the field.² However, as more scholars of race and politics entered the field, political science saw an expansion in the kinds of questions being posed. While this influx established crucial change within the field, there were — and are — still some gaps regarding the nature of these questions. What I mean to say here is that due to the institutions that political science finds itself tethered to understanding — such as the presidency or bureaucracy — we have come to a point where much — not all — of the work being done on Black politics takes a focus on Black elites or electoral politics.³ While this explores how politics are engaged in, what is often missed are the politics forged *on* and *within* the margins. To clarify, questions that have not yet featured centrally within the field are those that ask not simply how marginalized folks engage, but how and why they decide to do so. The answers to the latter of these inquiries help texturize Black political life and more deeply query the implications of how the political arena is traversed. It is for this reason that

² Hutchings and Valentino. "The Centrality of Race in American Politics". *Annual Review of Political Science* (2004).; Smith, Rogers M. "The Puzzling Place of Race in American Political Science." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 37, no. 1 (2004): 41–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4488760>.; Hochschild JL. "Race and Class in Political Science". *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* (2005).

³ Philpot, Tasha S., and Hanes Walton. "One of Our Own: Black Female Candidates and the Voters Who Support Them." *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2007): 49–62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4122905>.; Johnson, Tekla Ali, Pearl K. Ford Dowe, and Michael K. Fauntroy. "One America? President Obama's Non-Racial State." *Race, Gender & Class* 18, no. 3/4 (2011): 135–49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43496838>.; Faidosi, Amir Shawn, and Jon C. Rogowski. "Candidate Race, Partisanship, and Political Participation: When Do Black Candidates Increase Black Turnout?" *Political Research Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2015): 337–49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24371836>.

this project seeks to bring forth an understanding of how young Black activists and organizers who identify as women and/or gender-expansive make political decisions and why.

When offering explanations about Black political behavior and thought, political scientists have often turned to quantitative methods. While this methodological approach has assuredly provided indispensable insights, there is still much to be gleaned about the sharp edges of Black politics that cannot be fully captured by these methods alone. As political scientist Michael Hanchard states, “Too often, black politics is exclusively considered as a form of minority group politics and phenomena reducible to empirical investigation and observation, rather than a set of practices with underlying conceptual, theoretical, and epistemological premises”.⁴ As such, this chapter undertakes a qualitative approach — in-depth interviews and focus groups — in order to furnish deeper texture to the manner in which we understand Black “livingness and knowing”.⁵ By this, I mean that my goal is to more firmly establish an understanding of processes of political decision making by this group of women and gender-expansive activists and organizers and how they are informed by their thoughts about freedom and futurity. This includes understanding how they seek to find alignment with others who may have different methods and goals than them. Important here is that this project undertakes this task by centering the experiences, words, beliefs, and imaginations of those who I’ve posed as architects of freedom. As I see these actors as experts of their own experiences, a qualitative approach serves as a window for political scientists to gain an understanding of what these actors have already known. In other words, the findings of this chapter are an amalgam of what has come directly from the mouths of

⁴ Hanchard, Michael. “Contours of Black Political Thought: An Introduction and Perspective.” *Political Theory* 38, no. 4 (2010): 510–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25704831>.

⁵ McKittrick, 2020

those in pursuit of a different world as they are “...producers of meaning both in their own lives and during data collection”.⁶

Methodology Rationale

The crux of this project — understanding young Black activists and organizers as political actors — requires an approach where the folks of this population are stewards of their own stories, especially as one considers the words of scholar and organizer Charlene Carruthers who wrote “[w]hat is common terminology and practice in social justice circles today was theorized, written about, organized around, and fought for by people whose names we may never know”.⁷ As evidenced by Carruthers, those who engage in movement work in ways that leave a lasting impact often go without recognition. As such, I have taken a community-cognizant methodological approach that understands how cultural, social, political, and social situations inform people’s realities — especially the realities of young Black people who are particularly marginalized. I do so by centering a methodical framework inspired by scholar Venus Evans-Williams who wrote that it “obliges that we embrace our multiplicity and seek to express our data representations as multilocular and multi-textual”.⁸ This “multilocular” — having multiple components — modality dictates that the researcher embraces and understands the spectrum and nodes of realities that may emerge during data collection and tailors an approach that is fit for the context and conditions of the community it seeks to understand. In other words,

⁶ Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology.” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

⁷ Carruthers, 2018

⁸ Evans-Winters, Venus E. *Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry: A Mosaic for Writing Our Daughter’s Body*. Routledge, Taylor et Francis Group, (2019).

culturally-competent research practices that are situated within a politically precarious community such as this one serve as a break from constraints that are often present within other approaches.

Even further, a community that shares similar identities are subject to intra-group cleavages that are often defined as “cross-cutting issues”.⁹ Within these communities, there are often sub-groups who experience disproportionate consequences and disempowerment as the group’s “elite” strives to make their needs legitimate and legible to the dominant social group. This phenomenon of secondary marginalization, which was discussed earlier, is undergirded by a notion of respectability politics and often causes issues of gender, sexuality, and even class to determine how the Black community prioritizes certain political issues over others.¹⁰ The community-cognizant approach utilized in this project acknowledges these cleavages in a manner that helps political scientists better understand not only why this group engages politically in the ways that they do, but how they understand these political endeavors.

Black Queer Feminism as a Methodological Lens

Political science, as generally defined, is understood to be the study of power via analyses of elites, institutions, public policy, ideology, and activity. More specifically, American politics surveys these instruments of power in an attempt to understand the influence of particular factors on the political landscape of the United States. Power, a dominant focus within the field, regularly influences and is influenced by factors that are constantly in flux. When studying social movement activity — which is understood as collective and sustained challenges against dominant structures — an analysis

⁹ Cohen, 1999

¹⁰ Cohen, 1999; Bonilla-Silva, 2015

of power becomes central, but more importantly, fluid.¹¹ As groups vie for power, changes occur within and among the political realm. As a group that is impacted by incongruous power dynamics, Black women and gender-expansive folks have particularly precarious relationships with the political arena. As such, it is critical that any study that seeks to understand these relationships utilizes the appropriate frameworks to do so. As such, the methodological approach of this study is undergirded by a lens of Black Queer Feminism. Black Queer Feminism is a “political praxis (practice and theory) based in Black feminist and LGBTQ traditions and knowledge, through which people and groups seek to bring their full selves into the process of dismantling all systems of oppression”.¹² As a lens, it requires a centering of lived experience of those who are most marginalized.¹³ This praxis is an inherently political project as it explicitly seeks to redefine hegemonic notions of power dynamics or, in other words, who gets what, when, and why.

As Black Queer Feminism is concerned with constructively engaging the root of social ills, assigning this lens to the methodological approach of the study requires deep engagement with those who are staging the challenges as their political lives “...become data, data becomes praxis, praxis becomes awareness; [and] awareness becomes critical consciousness”.¹⁴ Research conducted within a Black Queer Feminist lens, then, can be conducted with the purpose of understanding the relationship between lived experience and critical, political consciousness. Further, I employ this lens with the intention of its salience and notability extending beyond the academy. I seek to engage in a reciprocal

¹¹ Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 2004

¹² Carruthers, 2018

¹³ Bonsu, 2018; Carruthers, 2018

¹⁴ Evans-Winters, 2019

ethos of data collection; as I receive knowledge and insight from this community, I hope to return something of use to it.

Data Collection

I conducted a total of 25 interviews over the course of 7 months. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and lasted 1 hour and 15 minutes, on average. I hosted two virtual focus groups of 10 participants each. These focus groups were conducted virtually and lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes.

Scope

This study will explore the political commitments and interests of young (age 18-36) Black women and gender expansive activists and organizers who partake in social movement activity in the United States — namely Chicago, St. Louis, and the Bay Area. I have selected this group because I believe that they will be engaged in the praxis of liberation prescience in a way that is distinctly novel from those who are not in movement.¹⁵ This hypothesis is undergirded by the notion that “some people with shared demographic characteristics remain a set of relatively unconnected individuals, whereas others are meaningful, connected groups whose shared identity has consequences for political participation”.¹⁶ Further, Michael Dawson’s theory of linked fate tells us that group consciousness plays a strong role in the development of political alignment among particular groups.¹⁷ This, Dawson argues, is informed by the long history of domination and violence towards Black people. As such, it is

¹⁵ This does mean that individuals who do not currently participate in movement activity cannot hold or practice liberation prescience.

¹⁶ Samuel Trachtman, Sarah F. Anzia, Charlotte Hill, “Age-Group Identity and Political Participation” (Research & Politics, 2023).

¹⁷ Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

reasonable to assume that groups who have particular commonalities may share similar political behavior and beliefs.

This project zeroes in even more on what Elizabeth Alexander has termed the “Trayvon Generation”, which is the generation of young folks who grew up within the past 25 years.¹⁸ It might be better understood to some as the culmination of Millennials and Gen Z (also known as “Zoomers”). It is imperative to note that the “Trayvon Generation” is not simply a designation of age. More pointedly, Alexander coined this term while toiling over this generation’s constant diet of knowing that violence on the basis of who they are is never far away. This generation, she notes, grew up with a particular hypervisibility of their vulnerability. This, she notes, is what has helped to characterize and shape this generation. From Trayvon Martin to Breonna Taylor, this generation has seen Black folks hunted simply for existing. The “social media age” has brought with it a hypervisibility of state sanctioned violence against those it deems to be “other” or even unhuman. Therefore, I have selected this age group due to their high rate of involvement in developing, sustaining, and growing a contemporary movement — the Movement for Black Lives. Though the Movement for Black Lives is intergenerational and sees people of all gender expressions and identities, it has often been characterized as one where young Black women and queer folks find themselves at the forefront. I believe that their social positions beget a particular sort of precarity that influences their understanding of what this world could, would, and should be if they have just the audacity to imagine it. When dissenters say “that’s not possible”, perhaps the response of these young activists will be, “it is now”.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Alexander, *The Trayvon Generation* (Grand Central Publishing, 2022).

I anticipate the potential pushback of not including the entire gender spectrum of Black folx in this study. However, I believe that there is a lot to be learned and understood about the political behaviors and commitments of those who have constantly found themselves vulnerable even within their own communities. For example, there is something to be said about the inimitable position of Black women gender-expansive folk within the Black community. Even further, there exists the ostracism and erasure of Black *queer* women amongst Black women — and it does not stop there. It is an unfortunate phenomenon that even within already marginal groups, there tends to be subsets that are even further marginalized by way of secondary marginalization. Dr. Kai M. Green, in conversation with Dr. Marquis Bey, stated:

“When we say “woman” today we usually mean cisgender; a whole host of other bodies, trans and gender non-conforming, are left out of our imaginary. It is important, too, to note how the visibility of transgender people, particularly the visibility of Black and transgender women of color has shifted the grammars of Black liberation this time. This time, Black liberation has laid itself out as the platform for those most marginalized under capitalisms’ time. We name patriarchy, misogyny, and racial capitalism. Women, Black and Queer, become the faces and the voices this time...”¹⁹

While troubling this category of “woman”, this project also understands that many bodies simply do not fit within gender categories that are legible to the outside world. In particular, gender non-conforming folks rebut gender in such a way that challenges the rigidly binaristic tendencies of society. Regardless of their own political commitments, the very existence of gender expansive folx muddies the waters of what hegemonic systems of oppression have forced us to believe is the “only way”. The very idea that an individual can move within — and outside of — gender serves as a reminder that the material reality of the world is simply what we make it, and when folx take over as

¹⁹ Green, Bey, “Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet”.

architects of freedom, the floorplan may begin to look very different. There is slippage among gendered (and non-gendered) categories. These very slippages — these interstices of existence — can create prospects to see the world other than what it appears to be. It is these prospects that this dissertation is taken up with. There is, to be sure, a lot to be said about the political behavior of Black folks in movement. However, this dissertation does not recognize identity as a marker of radical politics. Rather, it centers the work that is done by those that have often been disappeared. This, to reconsider an earlier point, highlights the necessity of an intersectional lens. Utilizing this lens is not solely about *who* gets brought to the fore, but rather about understanding *what* happens when we center those who are often erased.

When referring to those “in movement”, I mean folx who identify as activists, freedom fighters, or organizers and participate in some form of resistive or disruptive acts (i.e. protests, strikes, political quilting, etc). I place my lens here in order to center those that have displayed some form of action that is indicative of their desire to challenge status quo politics. My focus on those in movement within the United States is not meant to ignore the diasporic nature of movement work. Rather, I have placed the locus on the American context due to the “spark” of the Movement for Black Lives having taken place in a US city. Further, I am interested in the ways that these groups challenge American institutions in particular.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

The research participants for interviews and focus groups met the following criteria: (1) identified as Black and/or African American, (2) were between the ages of 18-36, (3) self-identified as an activist and/or organizer, (4) identified as a woman and/or gender non-conforming, and (5)

currently or previously reside(d) in Chicago, St. Louis, or the Bay Area.²⁰ Recruitment was mainly conducted via social media (Instagram and Facebook), University of Chicago-affiliated listservs, and word of mouth. Through these channels, I circulated two graphics — one version for one-on-one interviews and a second version for the focus group — that served as calls for participants. These recruitment graphics can be found in Appendix 4A.

Though social media was the primary source of recruitment, I also relied on pre-existing connections that I established as an organizer. In particular, I reached out to several organizations whose membership matched my eligibility criteria. These organizations included BYP100, Black Lives Matter Chicago, Dream Defenders, Assata's Daughters, and the Marsha P. Johnson Institute. Snowball sampling was an additional source of recruitment, as some participants shared the study information with their friends and colleagues. Interested individuals were directed to complete an interest form (via Google Forms) that screened their eligibility and collected their contact information. Once eligibility was determined, individuals were contacted from an email address that was created specifically for the research project. Once contact was established and interest was confirmed, the research participant received a consent form for their review and signature and a Google Calendar invite with information about either their interview or focus group session.

Locales

In order for individuals to qualify for participation in this study, they had to reside — currently or previously — in Chicago, St. Louis, or the Bay Area. These three U.S. cities were chosen for their

²⁰ There was no criteria for what qualified an individual as an activist or organizer. Those who self-identified as such were accepted into the study.

high levels of involvement within the Movement for Black Lives and its ensuing wave of political activity.²¹ By choosing areas with high levels of political activity, I not only had a large pool of politically active individuals to pull from, but was pulling from a pool that likely engaged in a range of political endeavors. This was an important aspect as this project undertakes understanding the spectrum of political behavior of its chosen population, and does not focus in on one method of engagement.

Compensation

For their time, interview participants were compensated \$10.00 and interview participants were compensated \$15.00. The funds were disbursed through the participant's payment app of choice (e.g. Venmo, CashApp, Zelle) within 48 hours of the conclusion of the interview or focus group. Some participants chose to use their compensation to contribute to mutual aid funds.

Researcher Characteristics

I conducted each interview and hosted each focus group as the sole researcher. I am a Black, queer, non-binary person. I am 29 years old, currently live in Chicago, and identify as an organizer whose first political home was an organization of Black folks ages 18-36 that utilize a Black Queer Feminist lens. These characteristics, which are in alignment with many of my participants, helped to establish an environment in which mutual trust, respect, and understanding could thrive. This, ideally, meant that interview and focus group participants could feel free to share their endeavors and activities with minimal fear of judgment. Further, my proximity to the participants helps to reduce the presence of negative interactions or perceptions of interviewee responses and experiences.

²¹ Ransby, 2018

Interview Structure

The average time for each interview was approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. This is due to the fact that my participants reside in three different locales — Chicago, St. Louis, and the Bay Area. Before each interview began, I thanked the participant for their time, provided an overview of the study, reassured them that they could interact with me in whatever way felt most comfortable (e.g. could speak in a conversational and familiar manner) and asked for consent to begin audio and visual recording.

Multiple forms of recording were utilized for each interview to ensure accuracy and to have backups in case one platform failed. Interviews were recorded (audio and video) through Zoom and were also audio recorded on the interviewer's cell phone. Recordings were stored on a password-encrypted Box account. Otter was utilized for audio transcription. These transcriptions were also stored in a password-encrypted Box account.

During each interview, detailed notes were taken. These notes included any significant remarks as well as details noticed by the researcher such as pauses, vocal fillers, changes in body language, and mood/energy shifts. Ultimately, these notes were used to mark significant moments to reflect back on as well as capture intimate details that added character, personality, and depth to each participant's responses.

The interview guide consisted of 12 main questions, each of which included several follow-ups or prompts for clarification. The full guide can be found in Appendix 4B. The interview began with several questions about the individual's identity, transitioned to some questions about conceptual frameworks, and ended with a larger discussion about political participation and world-building. In an

effort to understand what young Black activists mean when they say “we do this til we free us”, the interview guide was structured around three main tenets: 1) identity 2) political behavior and 3) thoughts about the future. The first part of the interview explored how participants thought about themselves as either an activist and/or organizer. It asked questions such as: “how did you come to be engaged in movement work?” in order to probe the participant’s understanding of themselves within movement spaces as well as their alignment with certain political designations (e.g. radical, leftist, liberal, etc.). The first portion of the interview was important as it provided a foundation for me to understand how each individual came to understand themselves as a political actor with political beliefs and commitments. The second portion gauged individuals’ conceptions of certain concepts such as “liberation”, “freedom”, and “resistance” and sought to understand the scope of behaviors engaged in. It also explored their affect surrounding these concepts. For example, I asked participants: “In what ways are liberation and freedom meaningful to you? and “How do you define liberation?”. As this project seeks to understand how this group thinks about political action and futurity, it is essential to investigate how they define and comprehend particular concepts. This exploration contributes necessary insight about the salience and utility of these concepts for this group. The definition of these terms in their own words grants an understanding of how these critical concepts are being talked about within the movement spaces that these individuals are part of. Some of these spaces are hubs that are poised to make prominent impacts on the political arena. Another question posed here asked, “In what ways, if at all, are the modes in which you engage politically conducive to the world you described?”.²² Seeking to more deeply understand the various forms of political participation in which this group

²² The preceding question asked participants how they would characterize a world in which they are truly free.

engages, the answers to this question give deep foresight into the animating proclamation of the project, “we do this ‘til we free us”. Uncovering how these young activists and organizers think about what actions are most favorable for their future renders a more robust illustration of the political behavior of young activists and organizers who identify as women or gender-expansive. The final section of the interview asked participants about their political behavior with particular attention to understanding why they engaged in certain actions and how it contributed — or didn’t — to the “better world” that they yearn for. As it follows, participants were also asked to describe and characterize the worlds that they dream of and what it would mean for them to *experience* freedom. One question asked, “When you think about a world where you are truly free, what does that look like? How would you characterize this world?”. The utility of this line of questioning rests in its ability to clearly delineate the visions of alternate worlds and futures held by this group. In other words, posing questions about their “ideal world” helps to more solidly pose this group as architects of freedom, as their answers furnish a solid look into what they hope to build and experience.

Focus Group Structure

I conducted two virtual focus groups via Zoom. Each group contained 10 participants and lasted for 1 hour and 30 minutes. Before the start of each group, I reviewed the goal of the study with the participants and received consent to record the session.

Detailed notes were taken during each focus group. This included notes about group dynamics and comfort, individual participation, and body language. I also noted moments of disagreement or strong alignment, even when it did not exist amongst the entire group. This was to ensure that the nuances of similarities and differences could later be explored during analysis. In exploring a diverse set

of actors, unraveling even the smallest points of divergence might uncover something novel about the population of study.

As with the interviews, multiple forms of recording were utilized to document the focus groups. Audio and video recording were in progress on two devices for both sessions. Audio transcription was conducted through Otter. A password-encrypted Box account was used for the storage of recordings and transcriptions.

Like the interview guide, the guide for the focus groups contained 12 questions. Though it followed the same progression, — identity, concepts, political participation — the questions were phrased in a way that encouraged participants to think with and as a group, not solely as an individual. The full guide can be found in Appendix 4C. This was an intentional structuring of the guide in order to contribute a collective perspective to these topics that would add more depth to the individual perspectives provided in the interviews. For example, thinking about what safety looks like as a group is different from what safety might mean for an individual. To illustrate, conversations about safety during interviews were mostly centered on what would make the individual feel most safe and secure. However, the focus groups had a different focus. During these sessions, there was a recognition that feeling safe varies from person to person. Therefore, the group was willing to think with each other about how they could navigate these differences and form a solution that met a basic need that felt good for everyone involved. The combination of these perspectives is quintessential for this project, as it helps to understand how these movement actors find alignment with one another when they have differing perspectives and maybe even different ideal outcomes.

Limitations

The research design of this project is subject to some limitations. First, there lies the standard limitation of potential bias due to social desirability or relationship between interviewer and interviewee. I mitigate this by establishing safe and trusting environments for participants to feel comfortable sharing their honest and full perspectives. My sample, alone, may pose itself as a limitation in that it is only representative of young Black women and GX folx in movement. In turn, it does not reflect the manifestation of liberation prescience amongst young Black activists in general. I acknowledge the perspectives that will be excluded due to selecting this sample. However, I stand firm in my previous rationale for selecting this group and believe that the theoretical guideposts serve as adequate amends.

The focus groups are also subject to relevant limitations. Firstly, there is the fact that they take place only in Chicago. However, not all participants live in or were born in Chicago and many have varying experience organizing in many cities across the country. Focus groups are also subject to potentially varying power dynamics that may lead to the emergence of dominant voices. Prior to the focus groups, I established an environment that encouraged respect, compassion, and trust amongst participants.

Conceptual Frameworks and Coding

Three conceptual guideposts were generated purely for the purpose of formulating the questions asked within the interviews and focus groups. The guideposts were: 1) politicization 2) liberation and world-building and 3) temporality. The first, politicization, was meant to explore how participants thought of themselves within movement spaces. In particular, the questions that arose from this concept were meant to survey how folks came to enter movement spaces and how they view

their navigation of them. Questions undergirded by the theme of liberation and world-building probed what some might call “freedom dreams”.²³ In other words, these questions were meant to elicit answers about what “better” worlds might look like and what folx within this group are doing to architect these realities. The third guidepost, temporality, posed questions that explored participant’s views about their own connection to past, present, and future through organizing. In semblance with one another, these conceptual frameworks assembled questioning guides that engaged participants about their thoughts about liberation and futurity by way of movement work.

Coding of data from interviews and focus groups was conducted by hand and each utilized a four-stage process. This in-depth process was carried out in order to refine the ideas expressed by participants into the elements of liberation prescience, which will be discussed in the findings section. The first round of coding was done using open coding with in vivo — or verbatim — code creation. By applying participants’ words as codes, I was able to stay as close to the meanings and intent of the participants as possible. While fostering a deeper understanding of the perspectives of participants, this approach also enhances the richness of the analysis. Considering various factors — e.g. generation and involvement in particular movement spaces — I find it important to include the language used by individuals as I believe it bears particular implications for the analysis of the data. This initial coding of transcripts allowed me to create general codes from the data that identified preliminary patterns and categories while utilizing the words and language of participants. This is where I developed my initial coding schema for understanding the political behavior of this group. Each topic was given a preliminary label that described its essence. For instance, a participant’s description of their desire to

²³ Kelley, 2002

engage in relationship and network building might be coded as “community building” or “educate to find alignment with others”, depending on the context.

16 open codes were produced from this round: 1) Liberation is embodied 2) Practice/make freedom 3) Create/build a world 4) Pursue things with pleasure 5) Ancestral knowledge is a repository 6) Be self-actualized and dignified human beings 7) Get a sustainable planet 8) Realize my vision in the here and now 9) Community and relationship building 10) Innate duality of community and self 11) Spirituality informs my actions and world-view 12) Social media is a tool 13) Anti-capitalism 14) Mental health 15) Safety and security and 16) Black thriving (across time). This set of open codes represent the general concepts that became evident after initial review of the data.

Open Code	# of Correlated Responses
1) Liberation is embodied	34
2) Practice/make freedom	31
3) Create/build a world	42
4) Pursue things with pleasure	30
5) Ancestral knowledge is a repository	22
6) Be self-actualized/dignified human beings	40
7) Get a sustainable planet	22
8) Realize my vision in the here and now	36
9) Community and relationship building	38
10) Innate duality of community and self	23
11) Spirituality informs my actions and worldview	24
12) Social Media is a tool	32
13) Anti-capitalism	34
14) Mental health	31
15) Safety and Security	41
16) Black thriving (across time)	22

Table 1. Frequency of Open Code Responses

This preliminary analysis unearthed a nascent story surrounding the pursuit of liberation and freedom and what comes with it — namely, thoughts about collectivity, knowledge production, self-determination, and the advancement of prosperity.

Thematic coding was utilized for the second round. This was an important step as it allowed me to organize the concepts that emerged during open coding in a manner that sorted them into themes and categories. From this stage, I was able to identify related ideas, concepts, and topics. I reviewed each theme in order to ensure that the (in vivo coded) data was accurately represented. I first refined the coded data to ensure that the generated theme communicated a coherent pattern and was reflective of the meanings of each initial open code. I proceeded to define and name each theme by determining the properties — extracted in stage 1 — that were represented. Names were then generated that both captured the scope of each theme and gestured back to the in vivo coding. For example, the open codes “liberation is embodied” and “realize my vision in the here and now” were combined into one thematic code — embodiment as strategy. All themes that were derived from this stage of coding include 1) embodiment as strategy 2) practicing values and vision 3) experiencing freedom 4) creating and understanding community 5) envisioning new worlds/conditions and 6) challenging norms. These six codes revealed the general relationships that came forth when this group was prompted to think about how and why they take political action.

Thematic Code	Open Code Grouping
1) Embodiment as strategy	liberation is embodied; realize my vision in the here and now
2) Practicing values and vision	practice/make freedom; realize my vision in the here and now
3) Experiencing freedom	create/build a world; pursue things with pleasure; be self-actualized/dignified human beings; mental health; Black thriving (across time)
4) Creating and understanding community	create/build a world; ancestral knowledge is a repository; community and relationship building; innate duality of community and self; social media as a tool; safety and security
5) Envisioning new worlds	practice/make freedom; create/build a world; get a sustainable planet
6) Challenging norms	realize my vision in the here and now; spirituality informs my worldview; anti-capitalism; Black thriving (across time)

Table 2. Formation of Thematic Codes

The third round of coding was completed using axial coding. From this stage, I was able to determine relationships that existed between the six thematic codes that reflected the most salient points from the data. No new codes were generated in this round. Instead, the relationships that were identified from this round provided a foundation for the last stage of coding. A map of the process used in this stage can be found in Appendix 4D.

Finally, selective coding was utilized in the last round. This step was completed in order to define the relationships that were established during the axial coding stage. This definition led to the development of three core concepts of liberation prescience that are most salient amongst this group which are 1) embodiment and practice, 2) community and collectivity, and 3) self-actualization. This four-stage coding process was conducted in order to employ a grounded theory approach, wherein a

new praxis — liberation prescience — was derived from the data. The three core concepts are explored in depth within the Findings section and a visual representation of these elements can be found in Figure 1 below.

Analysis

Interviews

10 out of 25 participants identified as women, 9 identified as gender non-conforming or gender-expansive (GX), and 6 identified as non-binary or genderfluid women. The oldest participant was 35 and the youngest was 18. 12 participants were Chicago-based, 7 were based in the Bay area, and 6 were based in St. Louis. Out of the 25 participants, 17 self-identified as organizers, 7 identified as activists, and 1 did not have a preference.

Focus Groups

Of the 20 participants, 10 identified as gender-nonconforming or gender-expansive, 7 identified as women, and 3 identified as non-binary women. The youngest participant was 21 and the oldest was 34 years old. 14 of the participants presently (or previously) reside in Chicago, 4 reside in St. Louis, and 2 reside in the Bay Area. When asked about their identity in movement spaces, 15 self-identified as organizers, 3 self-identified as activists, and 2 did identified as both activists and organizers.

Findings

Conducting interviews in semblance with focus groups provided the sort of textural depth needed to have a stronger understanding of what young Black people in movement mean when they say “we do this ‘til we free us”. As made clear by participants of this dissertation, there is no community

without the self, and there is no self without community. With that in mind, the questions posed in this dissertation demand to be answered by exploring both the self and the community as separate yet linked entities via interviews and focus groups. From the data collected during this process, I have dissected the praxis of liberation prescience into three elements that represent the conceptual commonalities that exist amongst this group's desire for better lived experience: 1) embodiment - a mode of existence wherein their day-to-day actions are representative of their beliefs and values 2) collectivity and community - a set of networks and relationships that allows its members to engage in acts of support and reciprocity while in pursuit of shared goals and 3) self-actualization - the unmitigated ability to experience freedom and humanity in the manner that one desires. In other words, despite the content of each individual's freedom dreams, these pillars represent where strong alignment is found amongst the group. They are not representative of every iteration or manifestation of liberation prescience. Rather, these three elements are meant to highlight the concepts, actions, and thoughts that hold the most salience amongst the participants of this study.

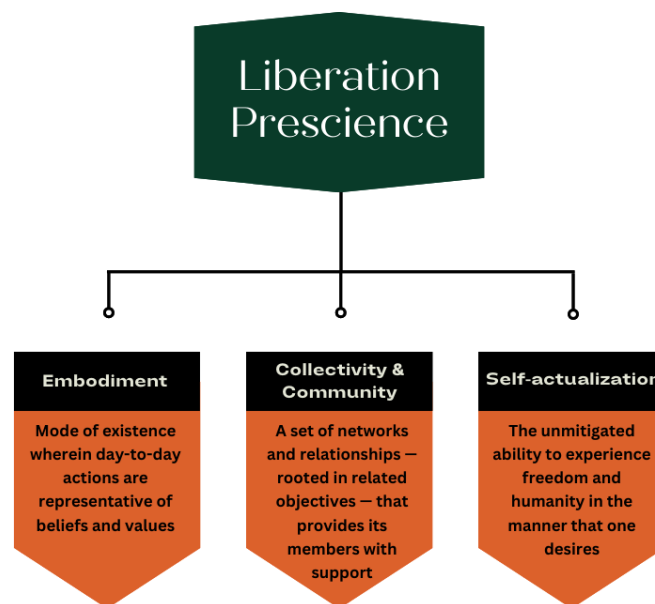


Figure 1. Pillars of Liberation Prescience amongst this study's population

The first element — embodiment — is representative of a sentiment expressed by the participants of this study which is the belief that “liberation” is not a destination, but a set of practices. More clearly, when thinking about a world in which they can finally experience true freedom, it is not a place or point in which you physically arrive. Rather, individuals seek to bring the world they dream of into fruition by regularly practicing their ideals and values. To illustrate, if someone’s freedom dreams are of a world where money as we know it is not the main form of legal tender, they might seek to engage in the use of other forms of currency in exchange for goods and services. In fact, several participants of this project detailed their involvement in trade and bartering amongst their closest community. Embodiment, then, is about practicing the values of the world you envision in the here and now. Reparations researcher of Common Futurists, Trevor Smith, explains this well as he states that it means:

“...doing the 22nd century work — placing ourselves, our ideas, and our strategies in the new world that we are trying to build...it rests on the practice of turning hope into strategies and not only reimagining a new future but also demanding changes to modern-day narratives, policies, and aspects of our culture so that the future we are envisioning can become a reality”.²⁴

By creating spaces that serve as living examples of what a desired world could look like, individuals — and collectives — become physical manifestations of their ideal worlds as they express their values and beliefs through their behavior, actions, and interactions with people, systems, and institutions.

²⁴ Common Futurists. “Meet Our New Futurist in Residence”. *Instagram*, April 17, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/p/C53uT3WOJW1/?igsh=YzZ2cWt6YncxaWEy>

Collectivity and Community — the second element — illustrates this group’s desire to engage in relationships of reciprocity and support. Further, community and collectivity were expressed as not only characteristics of this group’s ideal world, but as necessary means to get there. For most in this group, community serves as a place of refuge and recharge in the sense that developing relationships of reciprocity with others enables people to give more of themselves. An example of this that was discussed by a participant was the common phrase, “it takes a village”. Here, the participant explained that, in her context, having a “village” means being in relationship with others that allows for each individual to contribute what they can, and take what they need. In this way, community members are able to play off of the strengths of one another and step in when some folks need to step back. Writer and poet Nikki Giovanni penned, “[t]he world is not a pleasant place to be without someone to hold and be held by”.²⁵ As a means to an end, this is — and has been — an indispensable movement tool. For example, “maroon spaces” — as discussed by Barbara Ransby in *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the 21st Century* — are spaces where individuals within a movement can congregate, seek refuge, and ground themselves. She notes that these are not simply places of escape, but of healing and restoration.²⁶ These revitalizing spaces of community are quintessential when undergoing the stresses of movement work. The same concept still applies as an “end”, not just “means”. More clearly, more permanent situations akin to maroon spaces are sought by these movement actors. In their eyes, these more fixed structures would help to sustain a higher quality of life

²⁵ Nikki Giovanni, “The World is Not a Pleasant Place To Be” in *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni, 1968-1998* (2003). Poems. (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2013, 48.

²⁶ Ransby, 2018

and instead of serving as refuge from a white supremacist heteropatriarchy, might instead be a place to simply pause day-to-day life.

Self-actualization, which is the third element, concerns the desire to have the unmitigated ability to experience freedom and humanity in the manner that one desires. As a general concept, self-actualization refers to an individual's ability to reach their highest potential and to pursue their innermost aspirations and desires. It is important to note that self-actualization is a process in that it often entails an individual going through journeys of growth and development as they come into their full selves. As "actualization" is the process of making something real, "self-actualization" is to make real one's full ability. This "highest potential", as discussed by research participants, is not necessarily rooted in merit or what an individual has to offer. Rather, it concerns a person's ability to move through life without being constrained or limited. For example: what might it mean, one of my participants asked, if we could wake up in the morning and not have to worry about how we were going to pay our bills? Who might we be if we were not obligated to anything but our joy? These are the types of experiences this population of movement actors are seeking not just for themselves, but for the community and their future loved ones. It is within this journey where folx may further define what liberation and freedom feel like for them and all that comes with it. A sentiment expressed by many of the participants is that there is no self without the community, and there is no community without the self. This pillar, then, is also about a *collective* process of self-actualization — collective freedom — and how it looks for those who are seeking to exist in the ways that they have imagined for themselves, their loved ones, and their future loved ones.

Acting and Thinking as Architects of Freedom

To reiterate a previous point, one of the main goals of this dissertation is to understand the spectrum of political ideas and behaviors that exists amongst this group of young Black activists and organizers who identify as women or gender-expansive. While the next section details the elements of liberation prescience that were most salient amongst this group, it is essential to examine other elements that were relevant and important to this group. In other words, this section provides insight into what the data generally reflected about this group's political thoughts and behavior. While not all of these components informed the formulation of the main three elements of liberation prescience, they are still key components to painting a more full picture of the way this group practices liberation prescience.

One of the more prominent talking points across this group concerned the inextricability of systems of power and the ways in which marginalized communities are impacted by them. In other words, many folks within this group noted that their worldview and approach to organizing was informed by the fact that interlinked structures of oppression were enacting harm on them simultaneously. This showed up for "Cassian" in a conversation about the sustainability and preservation of the Earth. When speaking about what their organizing work centers on, Cassian shared the following:

Cassian: "We have to make Black people believe that [achieving a sustainable planet] is cool. If we bring indigenous folks...and other land stewards...together with Black folks, we have a fighting chance for sustainability. If we can show how it is connected to imperialism and other systems of power and see them all as modalities of destroying the Earth and become collectively opposed to them, maybe we have a shot.

While Cassian focuses here on environmentalism, their account details an understanding of how their organizing must be cognizant of the fact that systems of power work concurrently and in tandem with

one another. Another participant, “Santina”, also expressed concerns about the environment and its connection to interlinked power structures when thinking about how and why she organizes. When asked about the nature of her dream world, Santina began with a story about how she used to work with organizations who were focused on the environment and mobilized around issues of anti-Blackness and classism. She went on to say:

“I work with climate change adaptation not prevention...since it is already happening. I think a lot about how to secure infrastructure for Black people that is built with integrity. There’s this term “resilient infrastructure” that thinks about the fact that the more extreme climate events we have, the more homes will be battered. People need physical spaces. That’s the beginning. You need space to wash your as*, eat, and sleep. Environmentalism is a Black issue and it’s one I am very concerned about”.

What Cassian and Santina have described — through a lens of environmentalism — is an understanding that their organizing efforts must remain attuned to the ways that oppressive structures interact with one another. Though concerns about the environment were voiced by several other participants, it was not the only way that their understanding of the inextricable nature of these systems was expressed. One such example is a comment from a participant of Focus Group 2 who stated, “Listen...I, as a Black queer person, approach this world knowing that none of it was meant to support me or see me thrive. Therefore, I know that I must be willing to take it all down. None of this is going to sustain me or my people. So, it’s all gotta go”.

The political thoughts and actions of this group are also largely influenced by elements of spirituality. Spirituality, for the purposes of the project, is a term that was used to describe any sort of connection to something greater than the self. For some within this study’s population, this was understood as religious affiliation or non-affiliation, a connection to ancestors, a relationship to the

land, healing practices, or brujería. As articulated by some participants, there were various forms of spirituality that informed not only their practices, but their [political and social] values. Take, for instance, Yara's response to being asked whether her movement work is influenced by elements of spirituality. Yara shared:

"First and foremost. Black women...well...Black *people* are sacred and we do a lot of things that are connected to spirituality. I am more spiritual than religious, but God shows up in different ways for everyone...as in, like, deities. They show up in the way that people need regardless of affiliation with anything prescribed to a higher order. In my opinion, it is sort of like they are helping to guide us to a better world".

Though Yara's view of God and deities was a personal one that was not widely shared amongst this group, there was significant mention of spiritual elements playing a role within movement work for other participants. "Jas", for example, shared their perspective through a connection with nature as they stated:

"Yes, the things I value and the ways that I maintain and navigate relationships with folks are informed by certain types of spirituality. As a kid, I was really into nature. I always believed that things from the Earth have life forces within them...a spirit. I see my organizing work as a way to maintain the relationships with those spirits in a good way and, in turn, I am restored by them. Also, my value system is shaped by being a Christian scientist. I'm interested in the idea that people and relationships can be healed with a certain level of intentional devotion to them. Healing this world can't be forced but requires a fundamentally spiritual relationship".

For Jas, spirituality is not only about being restored by the Earth in the midst of movement work, but is a quintessential component of creating a better, "healed" world. In other words, Jas demonstrates how for some within this group, spiritual alignments help guide their decisions and actions within the political realm. In fact, "Trinity", a 34 year old non-binary person from Chicago said, "My work is spiritual in that it honors the work my ancestors have done before me...the blood that has been spilled,

stories that will never be told, the heartaches. I seek to create a world where those sorrows can't happen again".

One major aspect of their political behavior that I discussed with each participant was their journey into movement spaces. More specifically, I asked folks if there was a moment of politicization that they could point to as well as how they consider themselves to be someone who is engaged in movement work. Out of all 45 participants, 31 individuals were able to point to a specific event or time period that politicized them and/or propelled them into movement spaces. Of these 31 moments, the two most common responses were the murder of Trayvon Martin and the Uprising of 2020.²⁷ Notably, the differences between these responses were generational. That is, of the 19 millennials that could point to a specific moment, they named Trayvon Martin. Of the 12 Gen Z'ers that could name a particular moment, they pointed to the Uprising of 2020. This is important to note as it gestures back to my selection of the "Trayvon Generation" as the population of study in the first place — the hypervisibility of the precarity and disposability of Black lives has made a resonant impact on the formation of the political lives of this group of young Black activists and organizers.²⁸ One particularly salient moment from an interview was with Nara, a 28 year old from St. Louis who stated:

"I remember exactly where I was when I heard the news about Trayvon. [pause] I grew up in a small, white, Conservative town in the South. So even though I was already extremely aware of my Blackness, I think that moment in time made me particularly aware of the issues with my Blackness because I realized that I was not just different. I was a danger. [shifts in seat] And I was unsafe. I feared for the lives of my family. I knew I had to navigate the world differently

²⁷ I use "the Uprising of 2020" to group responses from individuals that named the murder of Breonna Taylor, the murder of George Floyd, or the period of civil unrest and protest activity that ensued as moments of politicization.

²⁸ As noted earlier, "The Trayvon Generation" — coined by Elizabeth Alexander refers to a political generation of folks who not only came of age in the last 25 years but who's worldviews, in some way, are impacted by unceasing stories and video evidence of anti-Black violence and murder.

and, more importantly, I knew I needed to do something. I didn't know what. But [pause] something. Anything. **My view of the world changed that day.**"

Nara details here an emotional and tender look into how this moment forever impacted the ways in which she viewed and navigated the world. True for so many others in this study, the senseless murder of Black and brown folks have left many young Black folks wanting to "do something" to change the way that they were experiencing the world.

Outside of polarizing moments such as these, some individuals were instead able to name experiences that compelled them to "do more". One common experience was working within a non-profit organization. For several individuals within this study, non-profit work not only served as their entry into "doing something", but further served as an impetus to do more. What I mean here is that for those who first looked to non-profit work in the early days of their political lives, they often ended up feeling disappointed with the limits of this work and sought to find other political homes such as BYP100 or the Black Visions Collective for instance.

Even for those who did not directly name either of these moments, most individuals still referred to Black precarity, anti-Blackness, or general dissatisfaction with politics as usual as reasons for their involvement in movement work. A participant of Focus Group 1 noted, "I think sh*t just sucks. I can't think of like a specific moment or anything like that but um [pause]. I think I just saw that the world sucks. And I also felt like it didn't have to be that way. So. I wanted to do what I could to change that". A second participant of the same group reinforced this by saying, "I think that's about right [laughs]. Things suck. There are some events that I can think of that like [pause] impacted the way I think about certain things. But as for like how I just came to start being active in this way? I think I got

tired of seeing my people suffer. And I'm still tired. But the work don't stop". As these two individuals make evident, even if they cannot point to a particular moment of politicization, most folks within this group were politicized by a desire to better their conditions and challenge the status quo.

Main Elements of Liberation Prescience Amongst This Group

The three main features of liberation prescience — embodiment and practice, community and collectivity, and self-actualization — that came to the fore amongst this group are related to one another in a way that makes clear that how folx think about the future impacts how they think about politics. For this group, to practice embodiment is, often, to be in community. To be in community is, often, a way to embark on a journey of self-actualization. More plainly, these features serve as weapons of mass construction for a new world but are also, importantly, elements that folx hope will continue to exist in these new worlds. As such, they are often both means and ends.

Embodiment and Practice

Themes of embodiment and practice were recurrent throughout the interview process. "Embodiment", as conceptualized by the participants, is a mode of existence wherein their day-to-day actions are representative of their beliefs and values. In other words, many participants placed importance on the "practice" of their worldview as they believed that the reality they yearn for is built through a set of practices. When speaking with "Kylan", a 34 year old gender-expansive person living in Chicago, they spoke about liberation as something that could be embodied, rather than a destination.

Interviewer: So, when you think about liberation and freedom, how, if at all, are they meaningful to you?

Participant: I don't see either of them as destinations with specific outcomes but as things that can be **embodied** day to day. "How can you practice

freedom today?” is something that you must ask yourself. “In what ways am I being chained and in what ways am I practicing resistance?” You then begin to **embody** a free being. I think about it as **practices** more so than destinations. I don’t ask what it looks like to be personally free, but how to orient myself towards collective liberation. **Embodied practice** begins by reorienting the self.

For Kylan, to experience liberation and freedom is not about arriving at a particular destination at some future time. Instead, freedom and liberation are realized through a set of practices that make real the values this participant aligns with in the here and now. In other words, one practices liberation prescience and experiences liberation by practicing their values regularly, as opposed to relegating them to some future utopia to be traveled to. Important here is how this explanation of embodiment evinces that, for this group, “better worlds” are not seen only as far-off Edens that cannot be experienced until they are fully constructed. Rather, to find liberation is to engage in a set of practices that brings their visions into the here and now. In an exchange between two participants in Focus Group 1, themes of embodiment as liberation were made clear.

Interviewer: Okay so a lot has been said about what liberation is, what it looks like, and also what it means to experience freedom. How do you all reconcile those visions against the reality that you live in?

Participant 1: I think about this all the time.

Participant 2: Me too!

Participant 1: Right! It’s something I think a lot about. Because the things that I want are not really...[pause] they are not really all that possible right now. Well. They are. But they are not the norm. So I have to sort of [pause] just act as if it is possible. I’m not sure if that makes sense. But. I just mean that I have to **act like what I want is sort of already here**.

Participant 2: [laughs] That makes sense, yes. I know what you mean. What I’m hearing is that the norms, or maybe the structures, of the world that you want are not currently the norm. The way that the world is right now is not...um... [pause] it is not set up to support the

things that you want? I think that's the first part of what you're saying? And so because of that, you understand that you have to just...make it be. You have to just do the things and build the things and be the thing that you want. **You kinda have to be a display of the world that you want to have.**

Participant 1: Yes. Yes to all of that. The way you worded that...I like that..."a display of the world you want to have".

This dialogue serves as a strong example of how this group is understanding embodiment. To them, their ideal worlds can be constructed in real time by serving as "displays" of those worlds. In other words, their day-to-day actions become a process of constructing the realities in which they want to exist. For many of the folx that I talked to, embodiment serves as a necessary tool for improving the conditions of the world.

Even for those that *do* dream of alternate realities and worlds as destinations, embodiment still serves as a way to realize these worlds in real time. Liberation, then, is not simply about arriving at a perfect world. It is about practicing the potentials of liberation so that they can be more widely actualized. For example, when asked about whether she believes true freedom can exist, interview participant "Arya" shared, "I definitely think it can exist. Things might not happen in this lifetime...which isn't surprising. But I know that this system is completely unsustainable. Something is inevitably going to break at some point". For Arya, true freedom is a sort of destination arrived at once "something breaks". However, she still believes that there will be a day where "the system" doesn't work the way it currently does, so she conducts herself as if that is already true. In other words, she embodies a set of practices that might characterize the world she believes will one day exist.

Community and Collectivity

The most recurrent and salient themes throughout the interview process were community and collectivity. It was shared that community and collectivity are an integral part of various aspects of this group's liberation prescience. In other words, themes of community were present when asked about various things, including their approach to organizing, how they view the future, and how they navigate the political realm. Collectivity, then, is a main tenet for developing, experiencing, and sharing "better" conditions. For instance, "Selah" (they/she) — a 25 year old non-binary woman — shared that, for her, freedom is "living vicariously through other people's joy". For Selah, community is a set of relationships that enable its members to engage in reciprocity.

Interviewer: So, can you only be in community with people who agree with you and see the world exactly as you do?

Selah: I need to be somewhere where there is impact and **relationship building**. Community is way more than having a friend. But is about how can we share the **collective** burdens and work towards an easier and more peaceful mode of existence and have more energy to do what we are called towards?

For Selah, and many others, collectivity hinges on reciprocity in a way that allows for a more deep engagement with other aspects in life. This reciprocity allows for give and take, if you will. More pointedly, a critical element of community lies in its ability to develop relationships that enable people to give more or less of themselves where needed. It might mean, for example, that someone can take a step back from their daily responsibilities and know that their community will step in. On the other hand, it might mean that folx would have the capacity to pour into their loved ones with more fervor, because the relationships they have built have minimized the stressors and burdens in their life. The strength of community breathes life into many of these young folks. As one participant mentioned,

“[m]y freedom necessitates that I like vicariously through other people’s joy. I won’t feel free unless the people I love are free”.

However, with community comes disagreement and misalignment. In other words, not everyone who is in community with one another is going to agree on everything. This means having to intentionally engage in finding alignment when possible, as well as finding ways forward through moments of disagreement. For most participants of this dissertation, education and “calls ins” were the most relied upon tools for maneuvering these moments. “Bria” shared a story about how she navigates points of disagreement with her sister.

Interviewer: You mentioned having trouble “bringing certain folks” into community. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Bria: Yeah, so [pause] what I mean by that is that I often struggle because I have a much different worldview than some of my family members. My sister is a great example. She went to school for nursing and is a Black mother, so she cares deeply about issues that impact Black mothers. I care about Black *birthing people*. That’s the difference. Unfortunately, she is a TERF while I’m not. I try to correct my sister. She thinks of womanhood as anyone who has a vagina and that they are the only ones who have kids. **I try to challenge that** and have conversations with her about why that is not true.

This tactic of “teaching” was a sentiment shared amongst most participants. When asked how they find alignment with others, most responded that they try to share information and knowledge in order to point people in a different direction. Some even mentioned that they know that the project of changing people’s minds is not worthwhile, so they’d prefer to just try to guide people to information that will allow them to be better informed. “Nalo” spoke further about this.

Interviewer: So this is just a follow up to the question about how you engage politically. As someone who sees liberation as embodiment, I was wondering if you can say a bit about how you do so in various spaces and with people who might not align with you?

Nalo: Organizing can be done in any space with any value system. For a while, I had the “organize everywhere!” perspective. But organizing work comes from **showing people** an alternative to just being discontent and showing them they have more power than they think and motivating them to do so. So it’s about laying choices out in front of people and it makes them think “oh wow”. I see it as consciousness raising and empowerment.

Bria and Nalo’s accounts make clear their commitment to using teaching as a tool to build and sustain community while in pursuit of liberation. While recognizing that they cannot make people agree with them, they are still interested in bringing those who they can into movement and seek to engage in teaching moments when and where possible. Community, then, is not just something that these actors idly seek, but is something that they actively build. Further, these individuals are not seeking community only for the sake of having reciprocal relationships, but are doing so in order to build a coalition of people that can contribute to the movement.

The focus groups were an integral part in combing through the importance of community as both means and an end. A striking example of the work of community is demonstrated by something that Focus Group 2 took it upon themselves to do. Before discussing any of the prepared questions, the participants worked with one another to establish a set of community agreements. These agreements served as a set of guidelines and boundaries about how they would engage with one another throughout the session. The goal, as expressed by the group, was to ensure that everyone felt respected, heard, uplifted, and seen. Though these individuals had never met one another, they recognized their shared identities and goals, and worked with one another to create — in real time — a community in which they felt safe and proud to participate in. These community agreements can be found in Appendix 4E. This project of thinking and acting with one another was a demonstration of several things. First, it was an exercise in showing how these individuals remain proactive about finding

alignment with those they might differ from. Rather than leave the environment open for conflict, they took preemptive measures to make sure that everyone was aware of how they'd like to be interacted with. Secondly, it modeled an instance of forming community as a means to achieve a safe environment. This action of thinking and acting with one another in this thought project is an important part of world-building — as they built this set of agreements, working together was a means. The end was a set of agreements, meant to govern the space they'd just curated. An interview participant would call this this process of being collaborative thought partners — even just for the creation of a temporary space — a system of checks and balances, as she noted that there has to be some sort of trust within networks of people as “you can’t build community until you trust that what you put in won’t be taken away from you”. In an interview with “Kaia”, I was struck by her characterization of liberation as an ecological project.

Interviewer: We’ve talked about how you understand yourself in movement spaces. How do you understand your interactions with others in these spaces?

Kaia: I have a background in studying ecosystems. My understanding of environments led me to become an organizer. So, the work that I do is in creating ecosystems that support liberation. Sometimes that means coalition work. I approach organizing as an ecology that needs to be built. **You as an individual is not a thing. You only exist only as much as you are in relation to others.** You exist only so far as others exist. Without it, your definition becomes less. [pause] Without you, community exists less. There is this innate duality of community in self.

This understanding of liberation as ecology emphasizes the importance of the relationships that exist between people and their environment — namely, other people.

Collectivity, the other aspect of this component, hinges on an idea of the existence of sets of knowledge, ideas, and action across time. It is how this project understands the relationship between

past, present, and future when it comes to the practices of these movement actors. More specifically, collectivity is understood here as a repertoire of sorts — one that holds a wealth of tools that have been and can be used to stake challenges against systems of power and institutions of oppression. One way that this project sought to probe participant’s understanding of this repertoire was to ask about their ancestral connections. In an interview with “Nalo”, she shared the ways in which their value system is impacted.

Interviewer: Would you say that your movement work is influenced by any elements of spirituality such as ancestral practices, a connection to nature, or religion?

Nalo: Yes. **The thing we call self is also a repository of ancestral knowledge.** I haven’t always known why I feel the way I do or why divine timing happens [pause] but I know that my ancestors are moving with and for me. Nothing I do is solely because I will it. It is sort of preordained or painted by a map that was not just made by me.

Nalo’s expression of this “preordained map” alludes to the sort of collectivity that has continued to play a significant role within Black movement spaces. For other participants, too, there was a sort of reverence for those who came before them and a sense of obligation for those who will come after them. In Focus Group 1, participants shared that when they think about how to make the world “better” for all people, they think of their future loved ones. For “Bria”, this meant thinking about looking backwards and forward through time.

Interviewer: Earlier, you mentioned a connection to other Black women through spiritual practices. Would you say that you find connection with others across time? I guess what I am asking is: how would you describe your connection to past, present, and future?

Bria: [pause] That is a great question...um. [pause] I am thinking here of Brittney Cooper’s racial politics of time. She says that time has always had a race and that race has been white. So, Black people have not been able to claim a time. So [pause], I try to take whiteness out of time and reclaim my time. Part of this means being [pause] **hopeful for future generations and thankful for past generations.**

Bria's discussion of a "racial politics of time" — as articulated by Brittany Cooper — more deeply explores the impact that temporarily (past, present, and future) has on the political actions of this group. For some, this also includes a greater attention to environmental justice to ensure that the planet is as safe and habitable as possible for future generations. Environmental justice, they argued, should be central to our movements. One participant even stated that they believe we should "make Black people believe that [a sustainable planet] is a worthwhile project. If we bring Indigenous folks and other land stewards together with Black folks, we have a fighting chance for sustainability. If we also connect it to imperialism and see it as a modality of destroying the earth and become **collectively** opposed to them, maybe we have a shot".

Self-Actualization

The end goal of what most of these folx in movement were seeking could be best characterized as "self-actualization". Self-actualization, as understood here, is the ability to experience freedom in the ways that one desires. As first explored in the theory chapter, self-actualization encompasses the modes of existence that become possible when people are free to explore and develop their full selves without having to worry about societal constraints or repression. Self-actualization, simply put, is about being able to experience life in the ways that you'd like to do so. This spectrum of experiences is bountiful, as what freedom looks like for one might be wildly different than what it looks like for another. However, for many of the folks I talked to, this experience of freedom looked like forming a commune off-grid and living off of the land with an intentionally curated community. This, I argue, demonstrates a desire these individuals hold to live within conditions and environments that they have built themselves. On

the other hand, some folks dream of a “simple” life. For example, “Rajah’s” idea of self-actualization was about being able to do with their time whatever they wanted.

Interviewer: So let me ask you a little about freedom and liberation...and what that might mean. When you think of a world where you are truly free, what does that look like?

Rajah: I think it means being able to wake up as yourself and do what you want when you walk out the door. I want to just frolic freely. For me, I’d want to be somewhere where we utilize a barter system so that we don’t have to worry about accumulating money. **I think it would also mean people being able to do things at their own pace and only the things they have capacity for.** Also I think it would be nice to have individualized forms of therapy. For example, some people really like plants and would benefit from nurturing plants.

In my conversation with Rajah about being truly free, they spoke about creating their own freedom and reimagining what it means to exist in the world. These sentiments expressed by Rajah are shared by so many others. I asked Focus Group 2 to respond to the ideas expressed in the following interaction from Focus Group 1 that explored what thinking about self-actualization as a group might look like.

Participant 8: What immediately came to mind for me [pause] was thinking about how I, as an individual would **live as I want to live without infringing on others’ ability to do the same.** In an ideal situation, I would be surrounded by like-minded people. But even then, we are different people who [laughs] just will not always want the same thing and we also have different things that we are into and different things that we would want to explore.

Participant 3: Mhm. I also struggle a bit with this one. I think the conclusion I come to is that I have to understand that it might be sort of impossible for that not to happen to some extent. I mean. Not infringing on other people would mean that there would never be any disagreements or anything like that. I think maybe the better focus is about my freedom not marginalizing anyone or...how can I explain? I think I am saying that, to me, it would mean **experiencing my life in the ways that I desire to but also in a way that doesn’t create disparate conditions for other people.** When I think about doing this in the conditions we have now, I know it wouldn’t work because there are just so many systems that people could take advantage of that would not only harm but marginalize and alienate and disparage others. But if we had different worldly conditions where that can’t really happen, I think...going back to the question...that the ability to experience freedom without worry is much more possible.

Participant 6: I agree with that. It is a little hard to conceptualize. ‘Cause when you think about everyone being able to do whatever they want? That sounds chaotic and also violent [laughs]. The only way for me to think about experiencing freedom with and around other people is to also imagine that the conditions simply would look different. I can’t experience freedom in a world that has systems that not only allow but sort of encourage disparity. **We would have to think, be, and act differently first.**

When I asked Focus Group 2 about their thoughts on this interaction, they agreed and emphasized the fact that they know they must make the conditions different in order to experience freedom in the ways they yearn to do so. Ultimately, this group of folks wants to move about the world without worry, want to be able to take part (or not) in the things that they enjoy, and don’t want to lessen anyone else’s experience of freedom. This is evidenced further by “Elias”, who stated: “Is better possible? Yes, and it’s worth fighting for. [pause] I don’t know which exact future is best [pause], but this one sucks and could be better”. She went on to say that, to her, freedom means “to walk through the world and feel your existence is valued”. Freedom, for those young people in movement, is a mode of existence wherein they can be whoever they want to be and interact with the world in ways that are safe, protected, and sustainable. In an interview with “Kylan”, they expressed thinking about freedom as a “practice”.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit more about how you’ve come to understand the pursuit of liberation?

Kylan: Liberation also is practice...[pause] it is embodied. I tried to envision a utopia and the question that came to mind was “**how can I realize that vision in the here and now** and what are the ways I need to shift within my mind, body, and choices, to be here in the here and now? How can I bring it into the present and does how I think about moving remain in alignment with that vision and idea?”

Kylan’s insight here is similar to that of other participants: what they want must be brought into the here and now in order for true liberation to be realized. Participants of Focus Group 2 spoke about the

difficulty of the project of thinking about what freedom might feel like. One participant noted, “Well. My first thought was that if I had more money and my bills were taken care of, then I would be a lot happier [laughs]. But that is just [pause]. That is not freedom. That is just being slightly more comfortable in a capitalist world”. This led to a conversation amongst the group about what it means to “be free” in the world as is versus what it would mean to experience freedom in a world that they were free to imagine the terrain of. Ultimately, participants expressed a desire to “escape” the confines of this current world, to “build” conditions where people could feel free to be themselves, and to “reorient” themselves to new ways of existence. One person noted that experiencing freedom might even mean not having to ask “what does it mean to be free?” in the first place as freedom would not simply be a dream, but a reality.

A Note on Difference

This study takes a cursory look at the political behavior of this group. As such, I will pay deeper attention to the differences and tensions that exist amongst a wider group as I expand this study. However, in establishing the commonalities that exist amongst this group when it comes to how they move politically and why, notable differences were also brought to the fore. These distinctions, to be sure, are crucial for cultivating a deeper conception of these young Black activists and organizers as architects of freedom. That is, it is not sufficient to know only the points upon which this group agrees. Rather, the areas in which they differ not only add texture, but widen our understanding of the spectrum that exists when talking about the ways in which this group navigates the political arena. As these individuals seek to find alignment with those who may not agree with them, share their views, or utilize the same movement strategies, understanding these nodes of difference provide us with a more

exhaustive understanding of the “this” in “we do this ‘til we free us”. After all, as this project seeks to understand the politics forged on the margins, it must interrogate the fissures that arise.

Upon analysis, there were no major differences identified within the responses from individuals across cities. That is, whether a participant lived in Chicago, St. Louis, or the Bay Area, their locale did not significantly impact their responses. There were also no notable differences between those who identified as women versus those who identified as gender-expansive. Out of 45 participants, 32 identified themselves as organizers and, in comparison to those who identify as activists or had no preference, these 32 individuals more often named their moment of politicization as either the murder of Trayvon Martin or the Uprising of 2020. As noted earlier, another illustrious finding regarding moments of politicization came down to generational differences. When naming a moment that politicized them or brought them to movement work, Millennials were more likely to name the murder of Trayvon Martin while Gen Z’ers more commonly named the Uprising of 2020.

When exploring how individuals within this group thought about futurity, some noteworthy differences arose. Of note, there were some differences of opinion when it came to leadership models. The predominant opinion was that for their purposes, the most ideal leadership models are circular leadership and “leader-full” approaches. In short, a “leader-full” approach challenges the top-down, charismatic leader approach that has been characteristic of some social movement models and, instead, encourages collective approaches to leadership, strategy, and relationship-building. Some common examples of charismatic leadership are that of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X during the

Civil Rights Movement.²⁹ A number of today's young activists — as evidenced by this group — believe that a more sustainable and indomitable way forward is through an understanding that people are the masters of their own experience and, therefore, the collective of knowledge, strengths, and experiences is more optimal than a hierarchical approach. Using this model, as put by historian Dr. Barbara Ransby, “they combine their own vision and experience with respect for the collective will”.³⁰

However, there were a few individuals within this study that did not agree with that lens. In fact, “Carrie” stated, “I think we need more MLKs and Angela Davises” when asked what “we do this ‘til we free us” meant for her. She went on to say, “We need a defined set of thought leaders who will be the ones to do the research and figure out a way forward. And then we can go to them for the information and follow their guidance. Especially in the midst of this influx of information that we get from the internet”. This perspective stands at quite an opposition to that of the majority of this group, as it distinctly calls for “charismatic leaders” to serve as a sort of beacon that guides people. Another interview participant expressed a similar perspective as they stated:

“I often feel confused about whether to call myself an activist or an organizer and I think part of that is a lack of leadership. I don’t know what to do, who to look to, or anything. I want to do something, and I do what I can [pause] but I just wish it was more easy to just [pause] have someone to look to. People sort of look at me sideways when I say I liked Stacey Abrams, but I feel like she did a great job of getting people to rally behind her and that sort of leadership is something I’d want to see more of”.

Similarly to Carrie, this participant expressed a desire for defined leaders to “look to” in order to help them navigate political decisions. Of note here is the fact that not only does this group have some

²⁹ Mahia, Gabriel. “Leadership and Charisma: A Study of Populist Leaders in History and Today.” Unpacking AI, Social Trends, and Career Lessons for a Thoughtful Tomorrow, 3 Sept. 2023.

³⁰ Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Taught Me: Shattering the Myth of the Leaderless Movement*, Colorlines, 12 June 2015, colorlines.com/article/ella-taught-me-shattering-myth-leaderless-movement/.

differences of opinion when it comes to leadership models, but those differences seem to have a notable impact on how some folks decide to — or not to — engage politically, leaving some individuals disconcerted.

Contrary to what I believe to be one of the most significant findings, not every participant within this study believed that their ideal world or a better world will ever be achieved. In fact, when directly asked if they believe as if the world they dream of is possible, a participant firmly stated “no” before the question was fully asked. I note this as it helps to illustrate how decisive this individual was about her thoughts about the future. I probed this a bit further and the individual responded, “I think that something better is worth fighting for. This world sucks and it should be better. I just don’t think my dream world is something we’ll see. I mean [pause] I think it is just more realistic to think of smaller scale possibilities”. A subset of young activists within this group shared similar ideas, with most expressing that they are hopeful that things will be better for future generations but are doubtful that their ideal worlds will be fully realized. “Reese” shared the following with me:

“I think I just feel like we’re damned if we do, damned if we don’t. I guess if enough people want something better, they will fight for it. And people do fight for it. However, I don’t personally believe that what I want is possible. Because of that, I sort of just try to create my own freedom and be a model for others to do the same but [pause] like I said: we are damned if we do, damned if we don’t”.

This sort of ambivalence, as expressed by some participants, demonstrates that some people will and do mobilize even if they do not believe that their dreams will be realized. This demands future inquiry as it begs the question: what, then, motivates these individuals to act?

Conclusion

Centering the voices, experiences, and language of young Black organizers was essential to the goals of this dissertation. Through focus groups and interviews, this dissertation explored how these movement actors think and talk about their desires, their political actions, and how they reconcile the tensions that exist. When this group says they want a “better” world, they mean that they seek to be free of systems and institutions that marginalize and oppress them and that they want to build safe, thriving, and sustainable worldly conditions. When they say “we do this ‘til we free us”, they are doing what they think it takes to get there: practicing liberation in the here and now, they are seeking and building community, and they are striving for conditions wherein self-actualization can be realized.

This project poses the actions of these young Black folx as political and seeks to reframe how political science thinks and talks about the manner in which this group decides to engage in politics. As a population with increasing influence on the political realm, political science must take their beliefs and actions seriously as it will, inevitably, shape the future of politics. As this group continues to make challenges against “politics as usual”, the norms and mores of its systems will experience a shift. For them, the pursuit of unmitigated freedom is a political project that seeks to bring about conditions where they can thrive. Therefore, when thinking about the political actions in which they seek to engage, it matters to them if these actions will then bring about this world that they yearn for. Their political actions, then, are assuredly impacted by their thoughts about futurity and liberation.

Appendix 4A - Recruitment Materials



INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS WANTED FOR RESEARCH STUDY

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to understand how young Black activists and organizers engage politically while desiring "better", alternative worlds.

WEAPONS OF MASS CONSTRUCTION: LIBERATION PRESCIENCE AS A RADICAL PRAXIS OF WORLD-BUILDING

A study investigating the political engagement and liberatory yearnings of young Black activists and organizers.

1 Virtual or In-Person Interview

Each participant will be compensated \$10



Eligibility Criteria:

- Ages 18-36
- Identify as Black/African American
- Identify as an activist and/or organizer
- Born or reside(d) in one of the following U.S. cities: Chicago, IL ; St. Louis, MO ; Oakland, CA
- Identify as a woman and/or gender expansive/gender non-conforming

* Your participation is voluntary and your identity will remain confidential.

Have questions or want to participate?
Please contact:
T Smith, PhD Candidate | University of Chicago | Political Science
radprax23@gmail.com **IRB23-1087**



FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS WANTED FOR RESEARCH STUDY

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to understand how young Black activists and organizers engage politically while desiring "better", alternative worlds.

WEAPONS OF MASS CONSTRUCTION: LIBERATION PRESCIENCE AS A RADICAL PRAXIS OF WORLD-BUILDING

A study investigating the political engagement and liberatory yearnings of young Black activists and organizers.

1 In-Person or Virtual Focus Group

Each participant will be compensated \$15



Eligibility Criteria:

- Ages 18-36
- Identify as Black/African American
- Identify as an activist and/or organizer
- Born or reside(d) in one of the following U.S. cities: Chicago, IL ; St. Louis, MO ; Oakland, CA
- Identify as a woman and/or gender expansive/gender non-conforming

*Your participation is voluntary and your identity will remain confidential.

Have questions or want to participate?

Please contact:

T Smith, PhD Candidate | University of Chicago | Political Science

radprax23@gmail.com

IRB23-1087

Appendix 4B - Interview Guide

1. Define for me how you think of yourself as an activist and/or organizer.
 - a. In what ways do you consider yourself to be a person who is engaged in movement work? What does that mean?
2. How, if at all, do you feel your identity (including generation) shapes your understanding of liberation and resistance?
 - a. How do you feel it impacts your participation in movement work?
3. How did you come to be engaged in movement work?
 - a. Was there a moment in your life that you would say politicized or radicalized you?
 - b. How would you describe your overall approach to movement work? i.e What is your “lens”?
4. In what ways are liberation and freedom meaningful to you? Are they things you personally desire?
 - a. How would you define liberation?
 - b. How do you fight for it?
5. What, for you, is political resistance?
 - a. Is this something you are personally invested in? How so?
6. How do you engage politically? Is there a certain type of action that you participate in more often than others?
 - a. Are there certain actions that you rarely — or never — take part in?
 - b. How do you engage politically through other means (e.g. art, media)?
7. What are some (3-5) essential pieces to building the world you dream of?
 - a. Are community, collaboration, and collectivity part of that?
 - i. How do you find alignment with those who have similar but different visions than you?
8. When you think about a world where you are truly free, what does that look like?
 - a. How would you characterize this world? Is this a world you believe can truly exist?
 - i. How do you know that it can?

9. In what ways, if at all, are the modes in which you engage politically conducive to the world you described?
 - a. Before deciding to participate in these ways, do you have to believe they are conducive to your ideal world?
 - b. Why, if at all, do you feel as if this particular set of actions will lead to the world you dream of?
10. When folks say “we do this ‘til we free us”, what does it mean for you? What is “this”?
11. Would you say that your movement work is influenced by any elements of spirituality (e.g. ancestral practices, magic, religion, connection to nature, etc.)?
12. When thinking about how you navigate movement work, how would you describe your connection to the past, present, and future?
 - a. Would you say that the way you think about and envision the future informs the way that you navigate the world?

Closer:

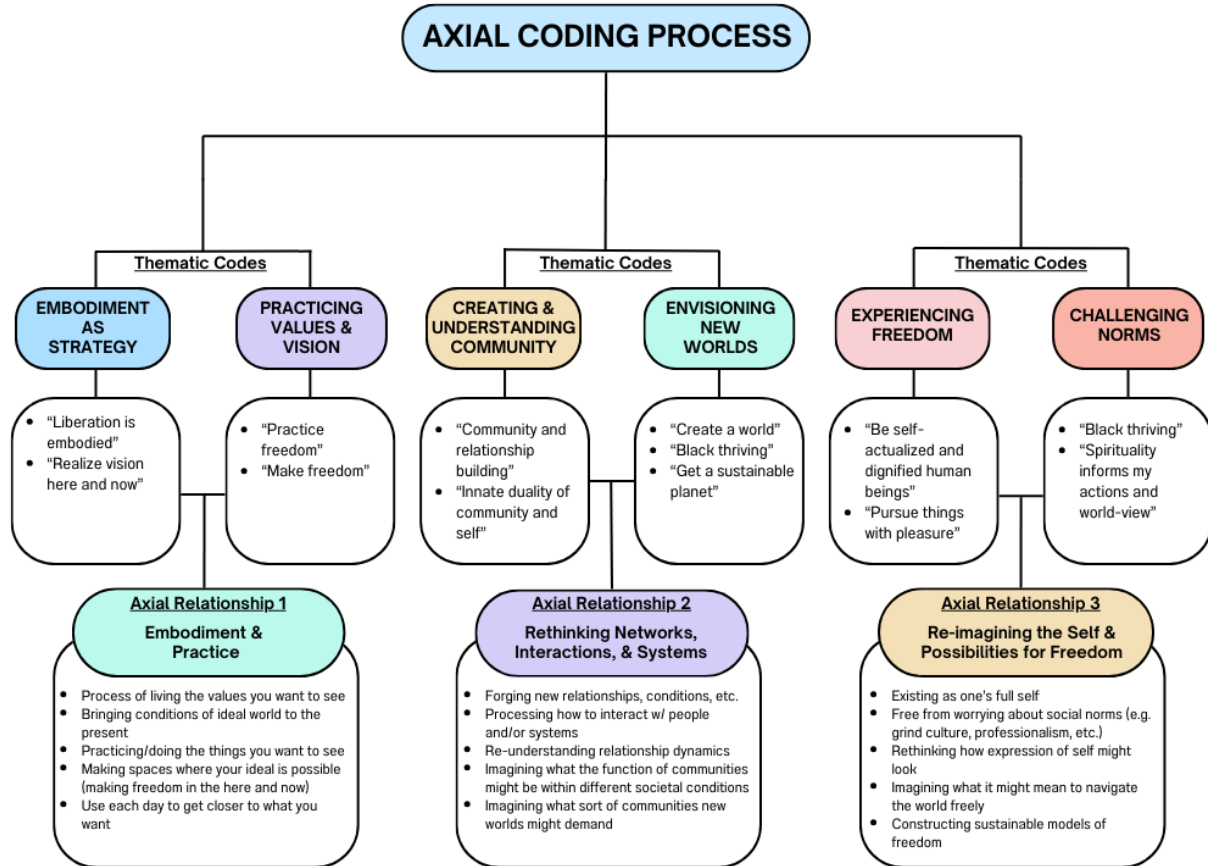
Thank you so much for your time. It means so much to me and is incredibly helpful for my research. Once the project is completed, I will be sending it out to those who participated in case you're interested in reading it. As promised, I will be sending over your compensation within 72 hours through your platform of choice. If you know anyone who might be interested in participating, please share my information with them, as I am in need of more participants. Either way, thank you again for your time!

Appendix 4C - Focus Group Guide

1. Let's begin with talking about how you each think of yourselves in movement spaces. Do you think of yourself as an activist and/or organizer?
 - a. I know some people and spaces have aversions to certain characterizations. For example, some people really do not like being called an activist. What has been your alls experience with this?
 - b. When it comes to being engaged in movement work, in what ways do you all consider yourself to be a person who is engaged in that movement work? Do you have political homes?
2. How, if at all, do you feel your identity (including generation) shapes your understanding of liberation and resistance?
 - a. How do you feel it impacts your participation in movement work?
 - b. Do you feel as if it brings you closer to others who identify similarly? For example, all of you in this room share a lot of things — what do you think that means for how you all think about liberation and resistance?
3. How did you each come to be engaged in movement work?
 - a. Do you feel as if you and/or your peers were politicized or radicalized by a particular moment?
4. In what ways are liberation and freedom meaningful? Are they things you personally desire for yourself and others?
 - a. How would we, as a group, define liberation?
 - b. How would we fight for it?
5. What, for the group, is political resistance?
 - a. Is this something you all are personally invested in? How so?
6. How do you engage politically? Is there a certain type of action that you participate in more often than others?
 - a. Are there certain actions that you rarely — or never — take part in?
 - b. Are there certain actions that are better suited for groups than individuals?
 - c. How do you engage politically through other means (e.g. art, media)?

7. Let's think about the worlds that each of you are dreaming of. What are some (3-5) essential pieces to building those worlds?
 - a. How do you find alignment with those who have similar but different visions than you?
8. When you think about a world where we are all truly free, what does that look like?
 - a. How would you characterize this world? Is this a world you believe can truly exist?
 - i. How do you know that it can?
9. In what ways, if at all, are the modes in which you engage politically conducive to the world you described?
 - a. Before deciding to participate in these ways, do you have to believe they are conducive to your ideal world?
 - b. Why, if at all, do you feel as if this particular set of actions will lead to the world you dream of?
 - c. Are there differences between the actions you take part in as individuals versus as a collective? What are those differences?
10. Are you all familiar with the phrase "we do this 'til we free us"? When folks say "that, what do you all think that means? What is "this"?"
11. In what ways would you say that your movement work is influenced by any elements of spirituality (e.g. ancestral practices, magic, religion, connection to nature, etc.)?
12. When thinking about how you navigate movement work, especially as a group, how would you describe the connection to the past, present, and future?
 - a. Would you say that the way you think about and envision the future informs the way that you navigate the world?

Appendix 4D - Axial Coding Schema



Appendix 4E - Community Agreements

1. We will use everyone's correct pronouns and/or name.
2. We will be mindful of other people's triggers and pain points.
3. If we come to a heated disagreement, we will let the issue rest in order to not cause harm.
4. We will apologize if and when we are wrong, and use it as a learning opportunity.
5. We understand that everyone's opinions are valid, even if we do not agree.
6. We understand that we are thought partners who are here for a common purpose, not to change each other's minds or "be right".

Chapter 5: Conclusion

“The need for change bulldozed a road down the center of my mind.”

- *Maya Angelou*

“When I dare to be powerful to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”

- *Audre Lorde*

Introduction

The principal objective of this dissertation was to meticulously uncover and dissect the intricacies and nuances that exist within the political behavior of young Black women and gender-expansive folks who identify as activists and/or organizers. As I’ve contended that this group is invested in movement work in novel ways, have unique orientations towards politics, and are not often centered as political actors, I posed and centered this group as architects of freedom as a way to more deeply understand how and why they make decisions to engage politically. In other words, this dissertation explored the relationship between how this group thinks about the future and how they navigate the political realm. As this study set out to understand the “why” in “we do this ‘til we free us”, I turned to the following questions:

1. How do young Black women and gender expansive activists think about achieving political equality, freedom, and liberation?
2. How do they decide to engage in, navigate, and traverse the political realm in pursuit of better futures?

Through in-depth interviews and focus groups with young Black activists and organizers in Chicago, St. Louis, and the Bay Area, I have extended a more rich understanding of why this group makes the

political decisions that they do as well as what they hope to achieve. Previously, the closest framework we had for understanding the process of acting in the present based upon the future you hope to bring about was that of prefigurative politics.¹ However, prefigurative politics is limited to describing the actions of groups engaged in social movements and is not equipped to understand individual action. Further Boggs' conception of prefigurative politics was rooted in the political context of the 1970s, which makes it infeasible to extrapolate to movement activity of the 21st century — especially that which is led by young, Black folx. This study of liberation prescience, then, takes seriously the political and social context within which this group operates and, against this backdrop, seeks to understand how they traverse these circumstances. The deepening of this understanding was reached by exploring, with this group, how their thoughts about the future shape their political actions. From this query, I introduced the praxis of liberation prescience as a way to define this relationship. I have argued that liberation prescience is both an epistemological and ontological ideology of freedom that describes how this group of activists and organizers engage in the collective project of imagining and manufacturing a new world in which they might experience self-actualization.

This introduction of liberation prescience provides a framework to more fully understand how this group wields “weapons of mass construction” in their pursuit of experiencing liberation. In other words, what I have sought to uncover are the thoughts, actions, and tactics — or, the “weapons” — utilized by these young Black activists to bring about conditions — the mass construction — wherein they have the ability to define their own experiences of freedom. Liberation prescience has the *ability* to take the dreams of this group from theory to reality, as it is the process of thinking and acting in the

¹ Boggs, 1977

present in a way that one believes could bring about a different or better future.² However, it is important to note here that there exists some tension when it comes to the feasibility of these futures. To put it simply, not all participants of this study firmly believe that their ideal world can be achieved. However, they did share the belief that something *better* than what they are currently experiencing is possible at least in theory and, therefore, worth fighting for. What I mean here is that even when participants expressed uncertainty or pure disbelief about whether they'd assuredly experience true freedom one day, they were still compelled to action just by the mere possibility of experiencing something better. This is a notable finding as it shows that utilizing and practicing liberation prescience — acting in a way that is informed by the future you seek to build — is rooted in a *desire* for something better, even if that “something” may never happen. This is illustrative of the fact that these young people in movement have decided to take action even for the mere possibility of something better. Though the potential of improvement is often enough to galvanize some folx to act, I contend that there is still something to ascertain from this finding. This, I believe, is the fact that even as these young, marginalized Black folx face social, political, and economic harm and often feel pressed into engaging in a politics of survival, many of them still actively choose to engage in what might be understood as a politics of resistance which explored herein as liberation prescience.³ Despite the uncertainty of the future, liberation prescience was found to be something that this group holds and practices. This is a testament to the fact that when it comes to how they engage politically, simply being

² I say “ability” here due to the fact that there is no guarantee that these actions will bring about the desired outcome. Instead, the individuals that partake in these actions have decided that, in most cases, it is conducive to constructing the world in which they would live. Further, I say “could” because not all participants hold the same conviction that their dream worlds will happen. However, it was a shared sentiment that *better* worlds are possible, even if not likely.

³ Though the tensions that exist between these two frameworks are beyond the scope of this dissertation, it will be explored as this project develops further into a book project.

hopeful for a better future is enough for them to invest in taking action. The findings of this study contribute to literatures that have sought to explore how and why folks take political action or engage in movement activity, more brightly illuminating our understanding of why and how folks are politically active beings.

This illumination, in large part, was possible due to the excavation of the three ways that liberation prescience manifests most eminently amongst this group. To provide a summary, the major findings show that the three principal elements of liberation prescience that were displayed amongst this group were 1) embodiment and practice 2) community and collectivity and 3) self-actualization. I defined the first element as a mode of existence wherein day-to-day actions are representative of beliefs and values. This element is representative of the belief of the majority of participants that liberation is a set of practices rather than a destination. With this in mind, these individuals seek to embody the values of their ideal worlds in the here and now in order to bring the world of which they dream into fruition. Rather than striving towards a certain point in time, they capitalize upon the present by making their dreams real through their actions. One example of this endeavor is the way some participants devalued the American dollar, and instead centered the use of other forms of currency through bartering systems.

The second element, community and collectivity, is understood here as a set of networks and relationships — rooted in related objectives — that provides its members with support. While this looks and feels differently for different folx, one such example is that many of the participants of this study expressed a strong desire to live off-grid in a commune with people and conditions that they have carefully tailored. This idea, as it was articulated, was generally undergirded by a desire for individuals

to be able to set the conditions and norms of their own environments. Whether participants believed that mainstream societies were incapable of sufficient change or that they simply wanted to be in control of something different, the overall notion is that there is a profuse desire to define the terms of one's own freedom. Self-actualization, the third element, is the unmitigated ability to experience freedom and humanity in the manner that one desires. Though this element also came with a spectrum of ideas, one prominent example was participants' desire to "frolic freely", "just exist", or "lay in the grass". Put simply, a large part of what it means for these young activists and organizers to be self-actualized is to simply just exist without worry. These findings provide us with a more robust appreciation for how young Black activists and organizers who identify as women or gender-expansive not only think about futurity, but how they make meaning by leveraging their political present to make way for a political future. This carries an impact for social science — namely political science and Black studies — as it explores Black futurity, epistemology, and political behavior undergirded by a desire for better conditions.

Further Implications

In previous chapters, I have discussed the implications that this work has for current and future scholars of political science. Important too are the implications this work has outside of the academy. More specifically, the findings of this dissertation are significant for the folks who participated in this study, those within their political networks, and those who are invested and/or interested in movement work as it offers an understanding of 1) how this group seeks to define their freedom and 2) what the majority of this group thinks about and engages in as they embark on this journey. More plainly, understanding the actions and commitments of this group, as well as how they think about

futurity, are useful tools for mobilization, strategizing, and alignment. By understanding what has emerged as most salient for those who are seeking to forge a path to better futures, organizer and activist communities stand to benefit greatly from a more rich look into what their peers — who may or may not align with them — are thinking about, doing, and pursuing. Having this information is an indispensable tool for creating strategies and forging intentional relationships that might not have been possible otherwise. Previously, I mentioned that I hope this project will give something back to the community from which its data is derived. It is my hope that these findings provide something of use for those who are seeking to build networks and relationships as they bring about better conditions for themselves and others. Perhaps the discoveries within this study will contribute to the further development of “weapons of mass construction” that those engaged in movement work might utilize to make their freedom.

On the Horizon

The future of this inquisition takes the shape of a project that can speak to liberation prescience as a practice of freedom amongst a wider and deeper population of Black folks. I see it as a project that not only challenges outdated stereotypes of Black political behavior, but one that challenges political science as a field as I seek to expand what we understand and value as political. This project was concerned with Black activists and organizers of the Travon Generation who identify as women or gender-expansive. However, the extension of this work will cast a wider net and place its focus on the ways in which liberation prescience manifests for Black folks more generally. At stake here lies an understanding of whether liberation prescience manifests uniquely within this study’s population, or if it can be observed in similar ways across factors such as age, geographical location, and

gender identity. This would also require a greater exploration of the varying contexts and tensions that exist between waves of social movement activity. For example, the norms, frameworks, and structures that were predominant during the Civil Rights Movement might have different implications for liberation prescience than that of the Movement for Black Lives. I offer conjecture that various factors — including but not limited to the fluctuation of political conditions across temporal contexts, influence of (social and mass) media, access to information and technology, and burgeoning political praxes/lenses — largely impact the modes through which liberation is held and practiced amid the conditions of various mass movements. Further, with some large scale analyses of generational civic engagement, the “next up” generation is often noted to be “the most political generation we have ever seen”.⁴ As it follows, I speculate further that varying levels of political activity across generations bears on the manifestation and enactment of liberation prescience across time. In this way, a future project would necessitate a greater interaction with social movement literature, and thus, would stand to make interventions into a wider set of academic fields. Ultimately, I would seek to understand how liberation prescience shows itself amongst a wider group of marginalized people.

In order to explore this line of inquiry, I would add to the methodology by also engaging in participant observation. This ethnographic approach would lend a unique richness to the data through first-hand accounts, immersion and rapport with the community of study, and extended observation

⁴ I am referring here to studies conducted by institutions such as The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement that surveys the political behavior of generations as they come of age. Prior to their study of Generation Z, Millennials were named as the most civically engaged generation the U.S. has seen. Generation Z now holds that title (Midena, Alberto, et al. “Gen Z Voted at a Higher Rate in 2022 Than Previous Generations in Their First Midterm Election.” *Circle at Tufts*, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 7 Aug. 2023, circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/gen-z-voted-higher-rate-2022-previous-generations-their-first-midterm-election.).

within the natural environment.⁵ The data produced, then, would reflect transparent, candid, and original accounts of information from the perspective of both the participants and the researcher. Rather than relying on participants' accounts of past experiences, this additional modality would provide real-time accounts of what these individuals are doing and what they are planning. As such, what stands to be learned becomes much more than what individuals have done. Instead, it allows me to tell a story about how they learn and adapt to various stimuli in the moment. For example, how might they navigate conflict within the group in real time? How might they navigate the confrontation of information that challenges their previous beliefs and values? Further, the nuances of the role of group dynamics on political decision-making will become more acutely observable through participant observation. While this current study explores group dynamics through the use of focus groups, an extension to participant observation offers a more textured and systematic structure with which to understand the interactions between group members.

Further, and perhaps more urgently, I would deepen the posturing of liberation prescience to have a more robust and exhaustive understanding of the processes of political behavior. What I mean to say is that within this current project, I have defined liberation prescience as the practice of acting presently in a way that is informed by a desired future. However, what has emerged from this research is an understanding that this process is much more circular than it is linear. It is for this reason that I'd proceed by advancing a conception of liberation prescience as a feedback loop, one which understands that the way people navigate the present is not static or rigid. As a person experiences the world, learns

⁵ By natural environment, I mean that data could be observed in real time within movement spaces — however that might look — rather than communicated within the setting of an interview or focus group.

new things, and has their beliefs challenged, their commitments, desires, and values shift. This shifting, then, may impact what a person desires from the future. As their thoughts about futurity evolve, they must then reform their present behavior to align with this evolution.

Finally, I hope that this work contributes to that being done by a host of other scholars — such as Dr. Jenn Jackson, Dr. Jordie Davies, Dr. Andrene Wright, and Dr. Christopher Harris — currently seeking to expand the priorities and approaches of the fields of political science and Black studies. Additionally, I hope that other scholars will extend and build upon this offering of liberation prescience in a way that becomes lucrative for both academia and the community that it centers. They might, for instance, explore the manifestations — if any — of liberation prescience in other racial groups or focus more directly on how young Black activists and organizers might reckon with striving towards a future that is not certain. I hope that future work regarding the study of liberation prescience continues to further illuminate the political lives of Black folks engaged in projects of world-building and futurity.

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