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HOLDING SPACE:  
LEARNING FROM A BLACK ART ORGANIZATION

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology  
The University of Mississippi

by

TIERNEY A. BAMRICK

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## ABSTRACT

Minority-led nonprofit organizations are marginalized in the United States arts sector, analyses of which rely heavily on data from dominant, often White-led institutional arts organizations. This study seeks to understand the experience of a minority-led arts organization in that context. I ask, what does artistic practice – both creative and organizational – look like for this organization? And what are the implications of that practice for the arts sector more broadly? Drawing on over a year of ethnographic work with The Network, a Black-led arts organization in a southern U.S. city, I argue that their asset-focused treatment of place, their value-centric approach to solving organizational problems, and their nuanced philosophy of art show significant differences from dominant sectoral paradigms. The organization consistently prioritizes audience connection and the needs of Black artists, and, in honoring those priorities, it rejects or remakes dominant art sector philosophies and approaches. That this rejection is necessary to establish and hold a space of Black creative freedom suggests a significant distance between dominant arts sector paradigms and the needs and experiences of non-dominant groups. I end this paper by reflecting on the need for ethnographic work in the nonprofit arts sector, calling on scholars and practitioners to undertake corrective work to center the voices, knowledges, and experiences of minority-led arts organizations and pointing to Hunter and Robinson's (2018) *Chocolate Cities* as a valuable frame through which to do so.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

I sat on my couch one afternoon listening to Justin talk about his hopes for the future. Justin is the program director for The Network, the arts nonprofit that granted me access for this study. We were near the end of what had been an incredibly rich hour and twenty-minute long phone interview, during which Justin was open and patient with my questions. He gave long answers that recalled history, his family background, his experiences in the local arts sector, and his perspective on the systemic issues facing Black creatives specifically and Black Americans generally. Now, he was talking about building a future in which his city could be a “sustainable Black arts community where artists create the work that they want to create, live comfortably, and have their work seen outside of just their neighborhood or city.” This was the future he and his colleagues at The Network were working toward. “What if people didn’t have to leave to be successful?” he asked. How transformative would that be for the whole city?

He described a beautiful vision of Black-led growth, and then I derailed it. I referenced our earlier conversation about the ways that the current arts sector stands in the way of a “sustainable Black arts community,” and I asked – if he could get them all in a room – what lessons Justin might have for dominant organizations and gatekeepers. His tone changed. “We spent a very long time getting in a room with people, telling them what needs to happen, telling them what should happen,” he said. He and other young, Black creatives had often been tapped by established, White-led organizations to give advice, to help with diversity work, to collaborate

on projects, and “then we see the results of it,” he said. Inequitable. Colonial. Tokenizing. All geared to secure some large, White-led organization grant money that would never benefit the “diverse communities” they were ostensibly trying to reach. “So now,” Justin said forcefully, “I would tell them nothing. I wouldn’t give them no game. I would just pool our resources and do it ourselves.”

Since its peak in the 1990s, the United States nonprofit art sector has seen a considerable contraction in its funding pool and audience share, leading to declining organizational health and a scramble for solutions (DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004; Ivey 2008; McDonnell and Tepper 2014; Sidford and Frasz 2017). In this environment, some “high culture nonprofits” – ballets, symphonies, operas, and art museums – and their supporters have retreated into safe, familiar rhetoric about the value of their particular art form, casting it as a cultural treasure in need of protection from changing demographics and new aesthetic value systems (McDonnell and Tepper 2014). Conversely, other organizations – including many “high culture nonprofits” – are emphasizing their importance to communities, touting their value as partners in cross-sectoral efforts at community development and revitalization (Foreman-Wernet 2017; Frenette 2017; Markusen and Gadwa 2010; McDonnell and Tepper 2014). In either case, though, minority-led organizations are largely marginalized in the discussion, a fact evidenced by the extreme and growing inequities in funding for these organizations, even as they often undertake the kind of robust community-focused work that arts leaders currently advocate (Frenette 2017; Sidford and Frasz 2017). The lack of attention extends to scholarly research as well, where little attention has been paid to the organizational approaches and concerns of minority-led nonprofit arts organizations in the United States (White 2018).

This paper contributes to addressing that gap through an ethnography of The Network, an arts nonprofit dedicated to promoting Black artists and their work in a majority-Black Southern city. I ask what the group's artistic practice – both its creative and organizational work – looks like and what the implications of that practice might be for the arts sector more generally. My findings suggest that The Network's perspective on art organizational work is substantially different from those that dominate art organizational discourse. This is especially apparent in the organization's relationship to its neighborhood, the conceptual connections between its existential needs and its mission, and the members' views on the purpose and scope of artwork. Though these findings reflect the experience of only one organization, they point to a need for more grounded analyses of minority-led arts organizations. I argue that scholarship on art organizations should turn to a focus on minority viewpoints and reject the imposition of preexisting frames. By centering the knowledges, philosophies, and meaning-makings of minority art workers, researchers would exercise a corrective function, building a body of literature that adds to our understanding of diverse art organizational models, and informing action toward a more equitable and democratic art system.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Changing Landscape*

Though there is some disagreement over the exact nature and causes of change in the arts sector, there is general scholarly agreement that the field is changing (DiMaggio 2006; Foreman-Wernet 2017; Ivey 2008; Novak-Leonard, O'Malley, and Truong 2015). Whether the changes result from the interplay of new digital entertainment and a more diverse U.S population (Novak-Leonard and Brown 2011), from the stresses of an “overbuilt” nonprofit arts sector (Ivey 2008), or from a range of internal organizational pressures and constraints (DiMaggio 2006), they manifest in two primary ways, as changes in participation and changes in funding.

### *Participation*

Many arts organizations and arts advocacy groups invest in regular surveys of their rates of audience participation. Though scholars have raised significant concerns over the usefulness, validity, and reliability of these data, arts organizations and funders place a great deal of emphasis on the results (Schuster 2008). The most consistent of these studies is the “Survey of Public Participation in the Arts” (SPPA), administered every four years since 1982 by the National Endowment for the Arts. There are several prominent analyses of the resulting data, including by DiMaggio and Mukhtar (2004), Novak-Leonard and Brown (2011), and Silber and

Triplett (2015). Each of these studies documents an overall decline in arts attendance since the survey began, though there is some variation in which arts genres suffered these declines the most acutely in any given set of years. Generally speaking, the declines have been greatest among the college-educated White cohort, a traditional stronghold of the U.S. institutional arts establishment.

DiMaggio and Mukhtar (2004), analyzing SPPA data between 1982 and 2002, suggest that trends that favor cosmopolitan tastes, combined with declining participation by young Whites, will have a long-term detrimental impact on established “high arts” institutions, who will cease to occupy a dominant place in the arts firmament. Silber and Triplett (2015), analyzing SPPA data through 2012, find a continuation of the trends observed by DiMaggio and Mukhtar (2004) and attribute them squarely to “changes in U.S. demographic composition,” arguing that while White participation levels decline, their previously high level of participation is not being replaced up by Americans from minority groups (2015:2).

It is important to note that the NEA Survey of Public Participation in the Arts is not an unbiased data-gathering tool. While it has attempted to capture participation in an ever-widening range of arts and culture events, the Survey’s findings are primarily based on “benchmarks”—event/activity types that have been represented in the Survey since 1982—and these benchmarks are skewed heavily toward arts institutions such as those dedicated to opera, ballet, classical music, and jazz (Silber and Triplett 2015). These are the only events/activities for which scholars have sufficient survey data to make meaningful observations about participation trends – “participation” being assessed primarily through event attendance, and Silber and Triplett (2015) note that this is a poor overall indicator of arts engagement. Indeed, they compare rates of attendance at benchmark events (33% of U.S. adults) to rates of engagement with the arts via a

digital platform (71% of U.S. adults) and argue for greater consideration of non-dominant modes of engagement.

Building on arguments about the insufficiency of SPPA metrics, Novak-Leonard and Brown (2011) argue for a multimodal analysis of arts participation that accounts for arts attendance, personal creative activities, and arts engagement via digital platforms. Adding to the call for better representation of *how* people engage with art, several scholars have drawn attention to insufficient data regarding *who* engages with art. Novak-Leonard, O'Malley, and Truong (2015) use Chinese immigrants as a pilot case to demonstrate that immigrant groups routinely underreport their arts participation, pointing to a large gap in measured arts engagement and actual arts engagement, especially among minority and immigrant groups. This finding is borne out in research not based entirely on SPPA data, as well, which finds “robust cultural activity taking place outside mainstream cultural institutions, including in lower-income communities, rural areas and neighborhoods comprising predominantly people of color,” groups and spaces that are underrepresented in the dominant SPPA data (Sidford and Frasz 2017).

Thus, while overall participation with traditionally dominant arts institutions has declined steadily for the last four decades, it is unclear whether or how overall real engagement with the arts is substantively changed. This lack of clarity has much to do with the dominance of Eurocentric arts organizations and practices, which prioritize attendance practices indicative of institutional arts (Ivey 2008) and fail to account for the diverse modes of engagement existing outside of the elite White cohort (Novak-Leonard et al. 2015; Sidford and Frasz 2017).

## *Arts Funding*

In a 2016 article for *The Atlantic*, Andy Horwitz asked, “Who should pay for the arts in America?” His article traced the history of the National Endowment for the Arts, arguing that since the Reagan era, the NEA has seen its ability to advocate for egalitarian arts access eroded by decreasing government support and the increasing influence of private donors. Due to this financial strain, recent NEA grant programs emphasize cross-sectoral partnerships that activate funds from both the public and private sector in partnerships with arts organizations. Horowitz argues that we cede the NEA to private funders and corporate interests at our collective cultural peril.

Bill Ivey, former Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, would agree with Horwitz’s (2016) concern. Ivey provides a searing rebuke of current U.S. arts policy in his 2008 book, *Arts, Inc.* In it, Ivey paints the U.S. arts sector as a bifurcated system, half profit-driven commercial enterprise and half non-profit sector anchored by long-standing, generally Eurocentric institutions. While he is not without criticisms of the commercial arts system, his most pointed criticisms fall on the nonprofit sector. He argues that, while non-profit status was intended to provide “art of lasting value” a space free of commercial profit motives, the realities of non-profit status create a “desperate need to retain grant support, patrons, and subscription audiences [that] constrains creativity and encourages conservative, repetitious programming” (2008:209).

The non-profit arts sector is, according to Ivey, intrinsically connected to social elites, whose increased foundation-based giving led directly to the 1970s-era proliferation of non-profit institutions. As a result of this growth, the sector wields more influence than ever before, with

“powerful advocacy organizations like Americans for the Arts, work[ing] to grow philanthropic and government support for cultural institutions,” the most powerful of which reproduce Western European art traditions (2008:211). This ideology is reaching its limit, however, as arts funding as a share of overall philanthropy peaked in the early 1990s and has declined by over one third since. Increasingly dependent on “essential patrons” and ever-dwindling government and foundation support, the non-profit art sector is straining under its weight.

For at least the last decade our nonprofit refined arts sector has presented striking indications of an overbuilt industry: depressed wages, lack of capital, defensive, conservative business practices... Today we argue the economic impact of the arts to community leaders ... but it’s probably fair to say that for the past decade the search for “new partners” has pretty much been about a reformulation of the very old search for new money. (Ivey 2008:215-16)

According to a 2011 report by Holly Sidford published by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, funding in the nonprofit sector is not only insufficient, as Ivey (2008) clearly states. It is also deeply unequal, largely ignoring artists and organizations working in non-European art forms and at the grassroots and community levels. According to Sidford’s *Fusing Arts, Culture, and Social Change* (2011), the majority of U.S. arts funding (55%) is funneled to the largest two percent of organizations, most with budgets of over \$5 million per year.

These institutions focus primarily on Western European art forms, and their programs serve audiences that are predominantly white and upper income. Only 10 percent of grant dollars made with a primary or secondary purpose of supporting the arts explicitly benefit underserved communities, including lower-income populations, communities of color and other disadvantaged groups. (Sidford 2011:1)

This inequity may be related to a feedback loop in the late-twentieth-century nonprofit arts funding system: success in one funding area (public, corporate, philanthropic) often leads to success in other areas (Schatteman and Bingle 2017; Tinkleman and Neely 2010). This is

especially true as funders emphasize project-based or matching grant programs over the ongoing operational support of yesteryear (Schatteman and Bingle 2017). For example, the National Endowment for the Arts claims a one-to-one average ratio of matching grants for its programs: “Each dollar awarded by Arts Endowment in direct grants to nonprofit organizations leverages up to nine dollars in private and other public funds” (National Endowment for the Arts 2020). In the resulting arts funding dynamic, success begets success, perpetuating the dominance of large, highly professionalized, often Eurocentric institutions that are thought to be “good stewards” of funder support (Ivey 2008).

Though the NEA emphasizes the value of its grants in assisting organizations to secure “private and other public funds” via matching programs (National Endowment for the Arts 2020) there is scholarly disagreement over the extent or existence of this “crowding-in” phenomenon (Brooks 1999; Schatteman and Bingle 2017). Brooks (1999), for example, analyzes the fundraising record of five large symphony orchestras, finding that the relationship between public and private funding streams is not statistically significant. Borgonovi (2006), in an analysis of U.S. nonprofit theaters, found that the crowding-in or crowding-out effects of public support on private donors varied based both grant amount and overall change in grant support. “At low levels, public support crowds-in private donations, while at higher levels it displaces them” (Borgonovi 2006:429). Still, an overall change in public funding within one calendar year generally leads to increased private giving (Borgonovi 2006).

Whether public giving via the NEA or other state, local, or federal entities crowds-in or crowds-out private donors seems to depend a great deal on context. Ultimately, however, crowding-in or crowding-out may make little difference to the funding realities of many minority-led arts organizations. In 2017, Holly Sidford authored another report, this time with

Alexis Frasz. Entitled *Not Just Money: Equity Issues in Cultural Philanthropy* (2017), it documented that funding became even more inequitable in the six years since the 2011 study. As a result, the authors argue that – even as attention to diversity and equity increases – “cultural philanthropy is not effectively – or equitably – supporting the dynamic pluralism of our evolving cultural landscape” (2017:1). Just as concerns over decreasing arts participation metrics only account for the experiences of traditional Eurocentric organizations, concerns over interactions between funding streams may be of little consequence to organizations that have access to such a small piece of the funding pie.

#### *Paths toward change*

In *The State of Nonprofit America* (2002), Wyszomirski and Toepler state that, “a decade of profound change following three decades of significant growth, has brought the nonprofit arts and cultural sector to the recognition of a need for even more change” (2002:215). In a paper presented to the Social Theory, Politics, and Arts conference, Dewey (2003) sketches many signs of a changing sector, including changing approaches to training arts administrators, a renewed focus on arts institutions as part of a broader cultural sector, and increased focus on globalization. For this project, two are most important: a blurring of the boundaries between “fine arts” and “heritage arts” and an increased focus on arts organizations as partners in community work (Dewey 2003). Dewey argues that these two factors point toward an art system in which new partnerships and organizational configurations are possible and necessary. In addition to blurring lines between arts subfields and a greater emphasis on community

involvement, there is also increased attention to the opportunities for engagement through new technologies (Borrupt 2018; Foreman-Wernet 2017).

Amid these changes, rhetorical differences between arts organizations and their supporters point to the complexity of transforming paradigms. In a study of “flagship” institutions in five American cities, Foreman-Wernet (2017) finds that opera companies, symphony orchestras, museums, ballets, and theaters operate within a “quality-versus-democracy” dichotomy that leads them to invoke elitist or democratic rhetoric depending on the audience – for example, donors versus community outreach partners. Generally, however, Foreman-Wernet (2017) finds that these organizations are working to align more closely with democratic ideals and rhetorics. While these organizations may look toward the value of democratization, their supporters are invested in rhetoric that positions art by Eurocentric organizations as “treasures” in need of protection from changing U.S. demographics (McDonnell and Tepper 2014). Conversely, audiences for community-based organizations tend to emphasize the value of arts organizations in the life of their neighborhoods (McDonnell and Tepper 2014).

As boundaries between the “high arts” (DiMaggio 2006) and the rest of the arts and culture sector blur (Wyszomirski and Toepler 2002) and as arts organizations respond to pressures by emphasizing their community value (Foreman-Wernet 2017), the arts funding system increasingly emphasizes project-based and matching grant programs (National Endowment for the Arts 2020; Schatteman and Bingle 2017). The impact of these changes can be seen in the rise of the creative cities theory and creative placemaking as prominent U.S. cultural policies (Florida 2002; Frenette 2017; Markusen and Gadwa 2010; Markusen and Nicodemus 2014). These theories emphasize the role of arts organizations as actors positioned to improve or facilitate the improvement of problems facing cities and neighborhoods (Florida

2002; Markusen and Gadwa 2010). I will discuss the literature about and prominent critiques of creative cities and creative placemaking in chapter 4.1.

### ***Black Art Participation and Organizations***

While Ivey (2018), Sidford (2011), and Sidford and Frasz (2017) make a clear case that the U.S. arts funding system preferences White, non-profit, Eurocentric organizations, their underlying assumptions seem to conflate art by people of color with poverty and disinvestment. To assume that all Black- or minority-led arts organizations conceive of themselves as social justice actors is to situate poverty and oppression as the dominant motivating forces of Black creativity. Two analyses of minority arts actors trouble this assumption.

Based on in-depth interviews with Black middle-class art patrons, Patricia A. Banks's *Black Cultural Advancement* (2010) exposes the degree to which Black arts patrons in Atlanta and New York seek to strengthen their racial identities via arts participation. Her findings document a complex phenomenon in which Black art patrons attempt to simultaneously strengthen their own racial identity while remediating historic marginalization and appropriation of Black art, a collective "form of black cultural advancement" (2010:284). Inherent in this activity is an awareness on the part of Black middle-class arts patrons of the systemic marginalization of Black art and artists. Indeed, according to Banks's findings, they clearly conceive of art consumption as a way to support Black artists, contribute to their canonization, and prevent their art from being sequestered in White spaces by wealthy White collectors. Banks argues that her findings complicate the idea that class distinction is the primary motivator for arts

participation, requiring that theories of arts participation more fully account for race and other non-economic factors.

Jason C. White (2018) explores the funding and opportunity disparities in majority- and minority-led art and culture organizations in his article, *Toward a Theory of Minority Entrepreneurship in the Non-Profit Arts Sector*. White suggests that minority-led non-profit arts organizations face three barriers: insufficient access to economic capital based on institutional racism within banks and other funding organizations, lack of opportunity due to low diversity within arts and culture gatekeeping positions (such as curators and board members), and entrenched Eurocentric tendencies in the art-consuming public (p. 292-293.) While these structural barriers suggest a deficit frame, the primary tools for overcoming them are clear assets: the strength of Black social and professional networks and Black entrepreneurial creativity.

Based on a structural frame of opportunity, one theory is that, upon recognizing scripts which constrain their capabilities, both artists and arts managers in the minority-led organizations engage in entrepreneurial action(s), and further utilize their shared agency to make script changes in the non-profit sector. (White 2018:296)

Taken together, Banks (2010) and White (2018) add nuance to arts sector analyses that tend to focus on Black people as deficit actors in the U.S. arts sector. Banks (2010) argues that, though Black Americans on average are less wealthy than Whites, the Black middle-class undertakes vigorous and intentional patronage of Black art, working to counteract both the marginalization and appropriation of Black art by Whites. Similarly, White (2018), while offering a thorough accounting of the myriad ways Black Americans are disadvantaged as both for-profit and non-profit organizational leaders, highlights the outsized impact of minority-led organizations on their communities and their capacity to effect badly-needed “script changes” – paradigm shifts – in the non-profit sector (p. 296). Both pieces call for a more nuanced approach

to understanding Black arts and culture, one that seeks to break down systemic barriers without discounting the agency, creativity, and impact of those acting within them. Hunter and Robinson (2016, 2018) offer such an approach.

In *The Sociology of Urban Black America* (2016), Marcus Anthony Hunter and Zandria F. Robinson trace the development of a deficit frame/asset frame dialectic in the study of Black communities, arguing that it reflects “the philosophical and disciplinary tension between structure and agency that animates most sociological pursuits” (p. 386). The authors argue that the twentieth century was dominated by deficit-frame analyses, but that the early twenty-first century has seen “a concerted effort to resurrect the emphasis on the cultural assets of urban Black American communities,” including a renewed focus on agentic place-making (p. 395). Expanding on this asset-based frame, Hunter and Robinson advocate a “Chocolate City Sociology” (p. 387):

Structure and agency are mutually constitutive. Urban Black Americans have exploited as much as possible the assets of particular places, exerting their individual and collective energies to remake structures intended to constrain them; in doing so, they offer an invaluable window into the social world and into the production of new, lasting, and relevant sociological knowledge. (Hunter and Robinson 2016:398)

Hunter and Robinson’s call for the renewed application of asset-based frames makes an explicit appeal to the “corrective” power of Black sociology as a check on dominant White narratives (2016:396). In *Black Logics, Black Methods: Indigenous Timelines, Race, and Ethnography* (2018), Hunter offers a model of this corrective methodology, beginning his piece with a quote from Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008):

“[W]hereas the knowledge/experience of Whites, as a group, leads them to produce racial knowledge that tends to reproduce the racial order,” Tufuku Zuberi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2008:18) powerfully assert in *White Logics, White Methods*, “the knowledge/experience of non-Whites, as groups, leads them to produce racial knowledge that

uncovers social relations of domination, practices of exclusion, and the like.” The aim of this article is to extend out from this pioneering observation. (Hunter 2018:207)

To accomplish this extension, Hunter reexamines work from his 2013 study of Philadelphia’s Black Seventh Ward, demonstrating how adherence to dominant White timelines obscures and undervalues the reality of Black experience. For example, Hunter argues, if scholars use the conventional 1929-1939 timeframe to analyze the impacts of the Great Depression on citizens of Philadelphia, they would overlook what Hunter calls “a Black Great Depression,” which began in 1920 (Hunter 2018:209). Using this and other examples, Hunter makes the case that external timelines should not be arbitrarily imposed on and used to contextualize communities of color. Rather, scholars should exercise a corrective function, seeking to reveal timelines and histories that more accurately reflect Black community experiences (2018:218).

That Black sociology of the type advocated by Hunter and Robinson (2018) can act as a much-needed corrective to White narratives is an idea with deep roots among Black scholars (Collins 2000; Hunter and Robinson 2016). A particularly notable contribution to this literature is Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), in which the author argues not only that Black knowledge has been systemically subjugated but that the knowledges of Black women and Black LGBT people have been subjugated further still. She calls attention to the fact that “all-Black spaces” are sites of “distinctive oppositional knowledges” (Collins 2000:10), and to reclaim this knowledge, Collins argues that scholars must seek it out in “alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals” (2000:14). In this way, she seeks to balance an examination of structural oppression with careful attention to the agentic actions of Black women activists, musicians, writers, and community leaders, finding a middle ground in the asset/deficit or, as she puts it, the “oppression and activism” dialectic (p. 3).

Drawing on their previous work, Hunter and Robinson's *Chocolate Cities* (2018) presents a theoretical model "to disrupt and replace existing language often used to describe and analyze Black American life" (p. x). Like Collins (2000) before them, Hunter and Robinson (2018) utilize both conventional sources of data and the work of Black writers, musicians, political leaders, and neighbors to craft a deep, decolonized narrative of life in Black-majority cities, areas created by both "structure (i.e., institutional racism and segregation) and agency (the Black Mapping of American space since Emancipation)" (2018:31).

The authors explicitly state their relationship to the asset/deficit dialectic, endeavoring to push sociology even further from the mid-twentieth century and post-Civil Rights era focus on disinvestment, poverty, and crime to a focus on community assets and agentic action (2018:179). This task, they find, requires not only attention to alternative sources of knowledge (such as musicians and community leaders), but attention to Black timelines, Black histories, and—most importantly for their work—Black maps (2018: 177).

Hunter and Robinson (2018) define Black maps via movement and center movement as an ever-present factor in Black placemaking and Black-majority places. The experiences of Black people in their movements across the map suggests two important "social facts" that undergird Hunter and Robinson's theorization of Black American life (2018:4). First, the *chocolate cities framework* (hereafter, CCF) suggests that Black life in America takes place wholly in "The South" (ibid). Since Black people in the United States experience racial segregation, oppression, and marginalization wherever they live on the map, the North of freedom and equality is a fiction. Thus, any theorization of significant difference in Black lived experience based on region or urban/suburban/rural location are overstated. Second, though Black migrants from the geographic South moved to escape entrenched White-on-Black

oppression, they did not necessarily seek to divest of the cultures, ideas, and ways of life that they developed there. Put another way, “Black migrants brought and bring ‘The South’... with them to their new homes” (2018:4).

There are three primary components of CCF, which Hunter and Robinson (2018) term *the village*, *the soul*, and *the power* (2018:10-11). They are mutually constituting and interdependent, and any definition of one necessarily overlaps with the other; however, it is useful to consider them in turn.

*The village* is the “fundamental unit or nucleus” of Black life, the seed from which chocolate cities – places dominated by Black community life – grow (Hunter and Robinson 2018:59). Villages are the places where, separated from Whites by intractable segregation, Black people organized to build communities and resist oppression (2018:10). The village is more than a place, however. It is also a metaphor for the “disposition toward community life” that characterizes Black place-making and community organizing (2018:87). In their physical manifestation, villages are places where residents form strong social, cultural, and ideological bonds that persist even as successive generations of Black people move across the Black map. As a practice, the village centers place-making and collective action as critical for Black resistance – “pervasive [practices] of Black people getting in formation” (Hunter and Robinson 2018:79)

*The soul* – the wide array of Black people’s cultural production – exists because of and in service of Black place-making efforts (Hunter and Robinson 2018:11). It is the storehouse of Black epistemologies and also the vehicle by which those epistemologies move across the Black map of America. The soul lives in music, visual art, writing, dance, and other culture work, and it has the capacity to reflect on the past, encapsulate the present, look toward the future, and

inspire collective action across the Black map. In CCF, the soul represents an ongoing dialogue about Black lives and experiences, a continually adapting set of epistemologies and expressive tools, that is cultivated, curated, and carried by Black culture workers.

The final component of CCF is *the power*, “the people power, economic power, political power embedded in chocolate cities” (Hunter and Robinson 2018:11). The power is sometimes expressed as large-scale resistance, but is more often manifest in small-scale, daily opposition to White domination. Hunter and Robinson argue that the power generally goes unrecognized, since scholars attentive to power tend to focus on White power structures; however, the power located in and originating from *chocolate cities* is crucial for Black resistance and necessary across the Black map. It is also a frequent target of White oppression. In CCF, Black-majority places are sites of “strategic contestation,” “where Black people make and revise place through tight-knit community networks of place makers, cultural production, and the consolidation of political and economic power” (Hunter and Robinson (2018:178-179).

CCF as an analytical framework is comprised of two parts: a foundational theorization of the *chocolate cities* phenomenon as crucial to Black life in all regions of the United States and theorizations of the social (the village), cultural (the soul), and political (the power) implications and iterations of that reality. CCF is a tool that scholars can and should use as a departure point in analyses of Black-majority places and organizations, facilitating an expanded view that is less clouded by White epistemologies. It also provides methodological guidance. CCF requires that data for analysis of Black life should be the “wisdom of everyday Black folk” (2018:xiii) and “the voices of culture workers who consistently describe and analyze the state of Black America” (2018:11). It also requires that scholars studying Black communities critically assess the

applicability of timelines, histories, and spatial understandings that do not reflect the lived experiences of those inhabiting them and should generally avoid imposing them.

### III. RESEARCH METHODS

In this project, I take an ethnographic approach to learning from the experiences and priorities of one minority-led arts organization, The Network, located in The City, the majority-Black southern United States city where I grew up. Work on this project began in December 2018 and continued through May 2020.

#### *Question and Approach*

Organizational literature pays only scant attention to the perspective of culture workers in minority-led arts organizations. This research begins to address that gap via an ethnography of one minority-led arts organization, The Network. I ask, what does artistic practice look like for this organization? And what might the implications of that practice be for organizational models that currently dominate the arts sector? In the context of this project, *artistic practice* refers to both the work of artists who create cultural products and experiences and the art-facilitating work of arts organizations.

Ethnography is a longstanding method for organizational research that places one researcher in a study location chosen to represent a specific organizational type or process (Fine, Morrill, and Surianarain 2009). Once granted access to an organizational space, ethnographic researchers develop relationships with organizational staff and other relevant constituents in an

effort to understand the organization as they understand it, prioritizing the knowledge of participants over knowledge imposed from external models or outsider viewpoints (Fine et al. 2009; Gold 1997; Lonsmann 2016). Though ethnography is useful in its grounded approach to studying the normal goings-on of a specific social context, that focus leads to several issues that must be addressed in research planning: control, generalizability, and researcher bias (Fine et al. 2009). I will address each of these as I lay out my methods, beginning with an introduction to The Network.

### ***About The Network***

In 2015, Andy convened at Evergreen Arts, a community art gallery in a rapidly gentrifying area of The City. Andy was only a few years into her career as an arts administrator working at Evergreen, but she had already become disturbed by what she saw as a lack of investment in and tokenization of art by Black artists – even in what was supposed to be a community-centered art space. In her role at Evergreen, Andy had met many of the young Black artists working in The City, as well as many of their supporters, and now she invited them all to discuss the needs of Black artists. Attendees talked about a lack of opportunity to show their work. They said they needed more visibility, someone to advocate that the media pay more attention to their work. They talked about being mistreated in White-dominated art spaces. They talked about needing robust mentorship through which young Black artists could learn how to advance and protect their work in The City’s arts scene. Out of this conversation, The Network was born.

Five years later, The Network is an arts event presenter and artist service organization located in a majority-Black, mid-sized Southern city (The City). Founded in 2015, its mission is

to “elevate Black artists, empower Black communities, and shift the culture of The City” (TheNetwork.org). The group, led by Andy as executive director, provides visual art exhibition and performing opportunities for Black artists, facilitates training in art business and professionalization, and encourages artistic collaboration and equitable community engagement. Their mission is broad, and it is enacted through a wide range of programs, including an artist development series, concert series, gallery exhibitions, and community engagement events.

For the first four years of their existence, The Network presented events at spaces borrowed from or rented to them by other arts organizations. By January 2019, though, they had secured sufficient funding to open The Space, their own office and event venue located in Pine Hill, a historic Black neighborhood. This should not, however, be taken as a sign of an organization flush with cash. As Frenette (2017) points out, scarce arts funding in the United States has led to an emphasis on funding capital improvements or discreet projects over general operating support, and this is certainly true for The Network. While they were able to assemble enough funding to acquire, renovate, and move into The Space, they must constantly generate revenue and new grant support to cover the ongoing expenses of rent, utilities, security, etc.

The lack of robust operating support also impacts The Network’s staff. At the outset of my project and for The Network’s first five years of existence, it was staffed completely by volunteers. The exact number of active staff expanded and contracted based on individuals’ availability, but it averaged fourteen people spread across four teams. Each team focused on one of the group’s primary goals: Black artist promotion and development, community engagement programs, “culture shifting” brand work, and organizational fundraising. Since January 2019, there is also a staff member dedicated specifically to generating revenue from The Space via event rentals. By the end of my study period, several large grants made it possible for The

Network to begin paying the team leaders, and although grant-based funding is by its nature limited, Andy sees this as an important first step in moving toward a fully compensated staff.

In addition to its own staff, The Network collaborates with various organizational partners to facilitate a robust, ongoing list of projects and programs. These include school-based programs, business incubator programs in Pine Hill, a regular artist development series, gallery shows, and performances. Their most significant partnership is with UpFront Records, a local recording label founded in 2016. UpFront is the brainchild of its now-CEO, David, a New York City-trained beatmaker and music producer who was raised in the Pine Hill neighborhood. UpFront presents events in collaboration with The Network and there is some overlap between their artist and staff rosters, but – perhaps more importantly – the groups are philosophically simpatico. They both advocate an unapologetic approach to advocating for Black artists, emphasizing the value of highly individual artistic expression.

The Network has several characteristics that make it ideal for a study seeking to understand the artistic practice of minority-led organizations that are marginalized in a White-led arts sector. First, it does not define itself as an arts organization, but as a *Black* arts organization, seeking not to conform to sectoral norms but to recreate them according to the needs of Black creatives and Black audiences. Its staff is exclusively Black, all artists involved are Black, and gallery exhibitions are organized around concepts of Black identity. Recent exhibition topics include “Black Masculinity,” “Black Femininity,” and “Predominantly White Institutions,” an exploration of the experiences of Black artists within predominantly White contexts. Though White audience members are not barred from attending events and exhibition, The Network’s staff is explicit in stating that their work is “not for them” (Andy) and does not need to take White emotions and interpretations into account. Staff members regularly talk about race,

racism, and the history of White appropriation and exploitation of work by Black culture makers, citing ongoing injustice as the inspiration for The Network's mission. Discussions about Blackness do not construct a homogenous monolith, however. The Network prioritizes diverse narratives, paying particular attention to issues of gender, sexuality, age, and location.

Second, The Network is a young organization, without fully established patterns of funding. This leads to significant precarity, which often drives nonprofit organizations to adopt missions that align with the interests of dominant funders, abandoning or altering the convictions that led members to organize in the first place (Minkoff and Powell 2006). While it remains to be seen whether The Network will ultimately succumb to these pressures, they currently take an oppositional stance, openly critiquing the arts structures that seem unwilling to support their work. An excellent example of this is Andy's 2019 interview with a reporter for *Essence Magazine* (Oliver 2019). In response to questions about whether The Network had difficulty securing funding as a new, Black artist-focused organization, she said:

We are trying to find ways to become more self-sufficient so that we're not having to rely completely on somebody deciding that we're worth it... Parts of our art economy are, like the rest of our society, mainly set up for folks who don't look like us. I think it's a con... It's past time that we're sitting in waiting on someone to invite us to their table when we could be creating a really beautiful one on our own. (Oliver 2019)

Instead of working to conform to the expectations of an art system that is inequitable in its treatment of minority-led organizations, The Network is working to opt-out entirely. This suggests that there could be a significant distance between their organizational approach and those that dominate the sector.

Andy's interview piqued my interest in The Network as a potential study group, though it was not my first introduction to them. In 2016, I was working as the marketing director for The

City's opera company, an organization that was investing in a yearly project of community outreach and engagement. In the course of this work, the Opera learned the value of building partnerships with hip, Millennial-run organizations, which conferred an otherwise unreachable *au courant* status on our sixty-year-old organization. The Network was one of the most talked-about new organizations during this period, and it was floated as a potential partner in the Opera's internal meetings. Though the partnership never materialized (at least during my time at the Opera), I began following The Network on social media and watched them grow over the next few years. By the time Andy's article came out in early 2019, I was back in school considering my thesis research options, and that article spurred me to action. I reached out to a friend for Andy's contact information and emailed her to request a meeting.

I met Andy in March 2019 and, after a long afternoon meeting, I asked if I could focus my study on The Network. She said that the group would be interested in having someone focus an academic study on them, but she was honest with me: they'd have thought that the researcher would be Black. "I'm a White woman who worked for a White arts organization approaching you as a White researcher wanting to study a Black arts organization," I replied. We talked about the fact that I am a researcher in training, and that the only thing I was sure about in this project was that I would make mistakes.

I left that meeting unsure of where I stood. Andy took the following week to think about my proposal and confer with the other Network staff members about their willingness to be involved. Then she emailed me: it was a yes. I was thrilled and terrified and humbled by their willingness to let me in.

### *Data Collection*

This project is in keeping with Kristen Esterberg's (2002) definition of ethnography as work in which researchers are "immersed in a field setting, participate in a variety of ways, observe while they are participating, take notes about what they are observing, [and] conduct informal (and sometimes formal) interviews" (2002:60). Between May 2019 and March 2020, I observed The Network's events and several organizational meetings, volunteered to assist the development committee, and conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with Network leaders and members.

### *Participant observation*

In "Talk is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy" (2014), Colin Jerolmack and Shamus Khan argue that ethnographic research must balance interview data with observational data to avoid the "attitudinal fallacy – the error of inferring situated behavior from verbal accounts" (2014:2). Since it is the collaborative action of The Network staff and artists that is most pertinent to my project, my research began with participant observations. I focused only on observations for the first three months of my research as I became more familiar with the organization and specific important individuals. Observations continued throughout the interview phase, as well.

The first set of participant observations took place during The Network's development committee meetings, which generally occurred on Monday evenings and averaged two hours and thirty minutes long. I took field jottings at each of five meetings and developed those jottings into descriptive field notes. I also was given access to two types of organizational documents:

meeting agendas and funding requests. Andy prepared agendas for each meeting in Google Docs, and she shared the file with me and the three regular committee members before each meeting. Andy used the agenda to guide discussion, while a designated member of the team made notes on the shared file to indicate work assignments, topics for further discussion, etc. The resulting documents provide a view of pre-meeting planning, in-meeting discussion, and post-meeting workflows. Since I had offered to help the committee with grant writing as they had need, I was also given access to several grant applications and other funding request documents, two of which Andy asked me to edit. The Network's grant and funding request documents show how organizational discussions and priorities are translated into project plans and funding requests. I did not ask for access to financial information beyond that which I was provided in these documents or through conversations with Network staff.

In addition to participant observation at development committee meetings, I also utilized participant observation of six of The Network's public events, taking field notes throughout and recording audio and video where appropriate. Events included a concert, three gallery shows, one pop-up shop featuring local makers, and one film screening. Event styles and lengths varied significantly, but I observed each event for a minimum of two hours. During these observations, I was attentive to the group's interaction with the public, their communication strategies, the themes or philosophies they promote, and how they refer to themselves as an organization and individual artists in The Space. These observations resulted in richly descriptive field notes, photos, and screenshots or copies of related marketing materials. Since a significant portion of their marketing takes place on social media, I also gathered data from related social media posts.

## *Interviews*

Three months after I began my observations, I started the interview phase. The purpose of these interviews ( $N=10$ ) is threefold: First, I worked to build an understanding of how individual Network artists and staff conceptualize artistic work, the role of arts organizations, and connections between art and community. Second, I focused on how members think about their work with The Network, how it reflects their values, and they measure its impact. Third, I gathered information about participants' personal views on the larger art system and the role of The Network therein.

I identified interview participants using a two-track method. Since the interview phase followed several months of observation, I began by compiling a list of Network staff and artists who were prominent in my observation notes: Andy (of course), Justin, Stephanie, Johnny, Danny, and Fletcher. Then I reached out to people they suggested I get in touch with: Jade, Mattie, David, and three artists with whom I was never able to schedule an interview. I also interviewed Ilona, the friend and Network artist who had originally given me Andy's contact information. Jade, Johnny, Justin, Stephanie, and Fletcher are also active artists, but each has a staff position, as well. I continued interviews until I reached saturation and sufficiency (Fine et al. 2009; Gold 1997). It is important to note that, due to time and energy pressures on The Network's volunteer staff, there was some staff turnover and shuffling during my time there. Thus, the interview participants' roles and positions indicated on the table below reflect their roles and positions at the time we talked. Some staff members have since changed positions, one has stepped back considerably from work with The Network, and one left the group altogether.

The final group of interview participants included the three Network members with the longest tenure in the group (Andy, Justin, and Stephanie), two members of the community

engagement team (Jade and Johnny), two members of the programming team (Justin and Danny), four members of the development team (Andy, Stephanie, Fletcher, and Mattie), the CEO of UpFront records (David), and one artist who does not also have a staff role (Ilona). Each interview participant provided their preferred pseudonym and pronouns.

**TABLE 3.1: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS**

PSEUDONYM	AGE	ROLE IN THE NETWORK
Andy <i>she, her</i>	29	Founder/Executive Director ( <i>Interviewed twice</i> )
Justin <i>he, him</i>	29	Founding Member/Programming Team Lead, Artist
Stephanie <i>she/her</i>	32	Founding Member/Development Team Member, Artist
Johnny <i>they, them</i>	26	Community Engagement Team Member, Artist
Danny <i>he, him</i>	26	Program Assistant, Artist
Fletcher <i>she, her</i>	28	Development Team Member, Artist
Jade <i>she, her</i>	21	Community Engagement Team Lead, Artist
Mattie <i>she, her</i>	34	Development Team Member
Ilona <i>he, him</i>	34	Member Artist
David <i>he, him</i>	40	CEO of UpFront Records

The interview participants listed above also appear frequently in my observation notes. I assigned pseudonyms as necessary to any other individuals who appear in observation notes or were mentioned by interviews participants.

All interviews were semi-structured, utilizing an interview guide (see appendix) while providing space for “interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words” (Esterberg 2002:85). Interviews took place in person or via phone depending on the interview participants’ level of comfort and schedules, and they took an average of ninety minutes to complete, though I paused each interview at one hour to give the participant the option to stop. I received permission to record each interview, provided a disclaimer about how participants could

voice concerns about my study, and included time for interviewees to ask questions about my research and its goals, if they wished. After completing the interviews, I used the Trint web app to speed the transcription process, though the app required significant line-by-line edits.

### *Confidentiality and analysis*

To protect the organization and individuals involved in this research, I use pseudonyms for all places and individuals. Out of respect for the connections between this organization and its community, I asked Network leadership to suggest place and organization names; however, they deferred to me on this point.

I stored all of my data in a password-protected file in Microsoft OneDrive, ensuring any local digital files were frequently and automatically backed-up to the OneDrive cloud. My digital research folder contained separate sub-folders for field notes, interview recordings and transcripts (including an excel-based interview log), and documents. I labeled field notes by location and date and included the approximate time at which the relevant observations were made (8 am-9:30 am, for example). Interview transcripts and recordings were labeled by the Network member's name and date. Following Esterberg's (2002) advice, I stored copies of all interview participant correspondence and related information in the files with interview transcripts and recordings. The few paper documents that I collected were scanned into this filing system, as well. I marked all physical and digital documents with the date and location that they were gathered, as well as with any applicable topic tags.

When half of my data collection was complete, I began analyzing transcriptions, field notes, and documents using Dedoose. I began by open coding (Esterberg 2002), using Dedoose

to group themes and keywords. This software enabled me to track the frequency and distribution of emerging themes across the entire data set and to easily re-sort the codes as needed. I augmented this keyword analysis with analytic memos noting nuances in the emerging themes. Once the open coding was complete, I used the frequency information and analytic memos to identify the most prevalent and potentially impactful themes. Using my findings from this stage, I moved next to focused coding, where I developed subthemes within the broad open codes and began to find cohesive patterns in the data. Once this process was complete, I consulted relevant literature to identify which code groups might be most pertinent to current work in the field of nonprofit arts and minority-led organizations. I assembled my three analysis chapters using a dialogic method between data and literature.

### *Addressing Challenges*

Fine, Morrill, and Surianarain (2009) identify three primary challenges of ethnographic work, control, generalizability, and bias. I will address each of these in turn. Fine, et al (2009) define control as a researcher's ability to "define and organize the setting" and argue that, in committing to observing participant routines as they unfold, ethnographers relinquish their control. In this study, I noticed my lack of control most when communication problems or changes in plans impacted my data gathering process. For example, while I planned to attend a given meeting or event, The Network might find it best to cancel or reschedule. It is, of course, The Network's right to schedule events and meetings according to their needs, and this did not create significant problems.

Generalizability is low in ethnographic research generally (Fine et al. 2009), and that is no less the case here. My findings emerge from the unique experience of The Network, and though I consider the implications of The Network's practice on the arts sector broadly, I do not argue that it is a prototypical case of either minority-led or Black-led arts organizations. Blackness is important to the Network, and it comes up frequently in this paper; however, I do not contend that any of The Network's priorities, approaches, or philosophies are indicative of Black-led organizations specifically or minority-led organizations generally. The Network itself is clear that there is no monolithic Black experience and no single Black art or essential Black style of organization. Thus, while this study provides a deep look at the work of one minority-led organization, I do not purport to represent all minority-led organizations.

The ethnographic method offers researchers the opportunity to center the knowledge and experiences of a specific study group, but it is highly susceptible to the influence of the researcher's own biases (Fine et al. 2009; Gold 1997; Miled 2019). Like all researchers, I have biases that I carry into my work and must manage through a constant process of reflexive analysis (Miled 2019). Because of my positionality as a White former-resident of The City, as a former member of the local arts establishment, and as an academic researcher, reflexive practice was at the root of my strategy to manage my biases in this work.

As I stated earlier, I am a White woman with a history of work in White-led, Eurocentric arts organizations. My Whiteness extends beyond the facts of my skin color and previous employment, however, extending through my suburban upbringing and private education. In college, I studied opera performance alongside the children of families whose wealth I could hardly fathom, marinating in the extremely Eurocentric world of university-level music instruction. I later moved to a very wealthy majority-White city in the mountain west to continue

my education through a master's in opera performance. After completing my master's in music, I accepted the opera marketing position back in my hometown, hoping to work for greater equity in the arts.

This background results in four areas of blindness and bias that are particularly problematic for this study. First, I see the world through White eyes. I make assumptions based on a White geographic and social imaginary of The City (assuming, for example, that the lives of Network members raised in the suburbs would have little in common with the lives of Pine Hill residents); I view art through a White intellectual-aesthetic frame (assuming, for example, that Network members would think it important to discuss their own aesthetic philosophies); I treat my own organizational experience as an arts administrator as normative or correct (wondering, for example, why The Network missed the opportunity to fundraise at its events); and I understand safety, security, aspiration, possibility, and the sufficiency of my cultural acumen through my own lived experience, an experience in which those things were only rarely in doubt.

Though I often forgot about my Whiteness while making observations or conducting interviews, I am grateful that I was frequently reminded. The reminders could be small things, like my complete ignorance of some cultural touchstone that everyone in the room recognized immediately. They could be larger moments. For example, Danny, The Network's program assistant, told me about the lengths his parents went to in order to ensure that he had access to a good quality public education, moving throughout The City or borrowing friend and family addresses to exert some control in a deeply inequitable education system. I asked him if that is a common story among his peers. "Super common," he replied. In my experience, parents who are concerned about education move to the wealthy suburban school districts or enroll their children in private schools. Neither of these was an option for Danny's parents, who nevertheless spent

significant energy and time managing his educational opportunities. Another reminder of Whiteness that sticks with me was my experience in The Space's parking lot one evening before a concert. I had never seen so many police cars just hanging out or passing through – I counted at least five. In my experience, the police appear when there is a problem. In contrast, this felt like a show of force – was this normal? It made me intensely uncomfortable and intensely aware of how little surveillance I experience in my daily life.

### *Managing bias*

I cultivated a systematic awareness of my positionality and bias using two tools, though neither erases its impact. First, I used Kristen Esterberg's "null hypothesis trick" (Esterberg 2002:175). This strategy suggests that qualitative researchers, having completed their data collection, should seek to disprove the null hypothesis that there is no pattern in the data. This forced me to continually question whether I was looking for patterns based on my own assumptions or based on what observations and Network staff were telling me. This necessitated several rounds of coding in which I asked, "If this pattern does not exist, where am I imposing it? What contrary evidence am I overlooking?" Since my goal was to understand The Network based on participant views and values, this strategy helped identify and remediate my own interpretive biases during the coding process. This would not have been possible without a constant process of reflexive analysis.

After I had a sense of what the early data was telling me, I began "member checking" my interpretations with the Network members I spoke to (Fine et al. 2009). I incorporated informal member checks into interviews or casual conversations during observations, asking follow-up

questions or probing for information that might confirm or cast doubt on my nascent analysis. This led me to recalibrate several base assumptions of this study, specifically those regarding the relative importance of the individual versus the group/community and the nature of The Network's desire for recognition and financial support. These member checks, combined with the semi-structured interview format, helped me grasp important aspects of Network staff member experiences that I would not have otherwise noticed.

At the end of my research period, I member checked my overall conclusions with Andy, asking what my analysis was missing or undervaluing in The Network's approach. She said that my analysis rang true and that it put into words things that she'd long struggled to communicate to partners and potential funders in the arts sector. She asked about the literature that had informed my work, and I recommended a few pieces that might be particularly useful. As she searched online for *Chocolate Cities* (Hunter and Robinson 2018), Andy said, "This feels very true. I'm just trying to think about how we can use it." That moment has played over and over in my head since. For all the generosity The Network showed in allowing me in and for all of our collaborative work to understand, what difference would this project really make to them?

## 4. ANALYSIS

### 4.1 THE NETWORK AND PINE HILL

Two little girls raced across my path as I walked into The Space one Sunday afternoon in early August 2019. They looked to be roughly kindergarten-age, their perky braids and frilly shirts bouncing as they skipped along, and two older women trailed behind them, chatting easily to each other as they walked toward me along the shaded plaza. It was one of those Southern late summer days when the heat and humidity seem to press in on you like deep water, but there was just enough breeze to be bearable. I entered the cool of The Space just after the girls, in time to see Jade greet them. She welcomed them warmly, crouching down to look them in the eyes and hold their little hands, and then ushered them over to a table to my right, toward a pile of backpacks. This event, a back-to-school Pop-Up, was intended to promote the work of local makers and do-ers – jewelry artists, clothing designers, visual artists, and community organizations – and to distribute free, supply-filled backpacks to neighborhood kids as they prepared to start a new school year.

Looking around the light-filled space, I saw eight vendor booths – one offered health and wellness information, one offered handmade jewelry, another offered artisan bath products, and several offered local designer clothing or visual art. One booth offered CBD-infused personal care products and teas (the vendor spoke to me at length about the need to advocate for hemp growers in our soybean-dominated agricultural region). As is customary for The Network, the

ongoing art show, FIBER, was still up in the front gallery, giving visitors the opportunity to shop among the art. Subtitled “An Exploration of Freedom,” FIBER “address[ed] the trials, triumphs and experiences of the Black woman’s narrative,” and it featured works of fiber art, sculpture, and painting, each accompanied by the artists’ own gallery notes. In the back gallery, large, brightly colored canvases featured portraits of local homeless people set in idyllic places. The show, by an artist who came to know his subjects when he was homeless, sought to trouble stereotypes about homeless people and raise money to meet their needs. Looking back to the front of The Space, there was a check-out counter where a Network staff member was ready to check-out any customer purchases. This was also where Network members distributed backpacks to families. The backpacks were flat Black and decorated with two or three buttons – one featuring The Network’s logo and another featuring a stylized Black power fist.

Single shoppers, pairs of friends, and families with energetic kids moved between vendor booths, stood focused on one or another piece of exhibition art, gathered backpacks, or visited the refreshments table, which was covered in lunchbox sized bags of chips and cookies, candy, and juice drinks (including grown-up juice.) Danny manned the table, keeping an eye on little kids who tried to (and occasionally succeeded in) making off with a ring pop or mini bag of skittles. At the time I arrived, there were about twenty-five people in The Space, most young Black people who seemed familiar with Network staff members or the vendors, though a couple of older White women browsed the jewelry and handmade bags (one would later make a scene of returning to The Space with a bag she apparently forgot to pay for.)

This Pop-Up event was a frequent topic of conversation during my time observing The Network’s development meetings over the proceeding months – there seemed to be a lot of staff emotion bound up in it. This was an opportunity to make real, face-to-face connections with The

Space's neighbors, a reason for people who might not visit a gallery to come into The Space and see what The Network is doing. And connections were certainly made. Jade told me that, after I left, a group of middle-school kids took over the event's music playlist, schooling the "old folks" in the new, cool music. She said the kids thought it was cool to be able to come into an adult space and run the music – she was glad they felt heard in The Space. Similarly, Stephanie shared that she had spoken with a family at the Pop-Up, and without prompting, their little girl said, "I want to be a baker!" For Stephanie, who is very focused on the idea that children – especially Black children – need to be exposed to creative fields as a viable career alternative, this child had been able to see a space full of "creative people that look like her." The Network's staff also connected with parents, who – while putting backpacks on their children – said they would never have been comfortable coming into a gallery.

When I moved into the interview portion of my data gathering, I included several questions about how The Network interacts with and relates to Pine Hill and its residents. In response to these questions, Network staff members often mentioned the Pop-Up, emphasizing moments of connection, especially those with children. In the same breath, though, they emphasized that The Network is "trying" – trying to figure out how to be involved in Pine Hill, trying to make connections, trying to have an impact. This reflected an idea that came up repeatedly in my observations of Pop-Up planning: that the event was a chance to address criticism – from both inside The Network and outside – that the group, while located in Pine Hill, was not sufficiently connected to the community there. This is a serious critique in contemporary art organizational discourse, and an organization's perceived success or failure in community work may have serious implications for its ability to attract the necessary funders (Frenette 2017).

## *Art Organizations and Place*

Two place-based paradigms have dominated arts organizational discourse and funding since the early 2000s: Richard Florida's Creative Cities (2002) thesis and the National Endowment for the Arts' "Creative Placemaking" (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). Both paradigms tie the arts to economic growth and urban renewal projects – and thus to the goals of private businesses and corporations – by using the arts to address pressing social problems (Frenette 2017). The resulting "cross-sectoral collaboration" mirrors a change in public funding for the arts, as well, where project-focused grants consume an ever-larger portion of public art funding, especially through the NEA (Gadwa Nicodemus 2013). As Frenette (2017) makes clear, the state of arts funding in this country – characterized by insufficient government funding and incredible pressure for private support – requires that arts organizations maintain a connection to the interests of private and corporate funders. To the extent that private funding is concerned with projects of urban renewal and revitalization, it is in the interest of arts organizations to be involved.

In *The Rise of The Creative Class* (Florida 2003), Richard Florida argued that urban planners and development committees should switch from their previous focus on attracting new businesses to a focus on building the diverse, open communities and robust lifestyle amenities that the then-emergent creative class enjoys. This creative class would occupy and revitalize cheap properties in disinvested urban places, and this revitalization would attract greater economic investment. Inherent in this thesis is a view of urban places as a) deficit places and b) available places. Thus, Florida's view has much in common with the deficit analyses critiqued by Hunter and Robinson (2016); however, while mid-century deficit analyses construct these spaces as social problems, Florida (2003) views them as places ripe for investment, places from which

large-scale urban renewal might grow. The economic growth that Florida promises is, however, a source of significant critique. Authors argue that artists and the creative class, especially those that move into and occupy cheap real estate in struggling, majority-minority neighborhoods are complicit in large scale processes of “capitalist urbanization” and gentrification that dispossess longtime residents and devastate communities (Grodach, Foster, and Murdoch 2018; Ley 2003; Novy and Colomb 2013). Still, Florida’s creative cities thesis has been extremely influential, establishing a strong connection between arts organizations’ funding needs and municipal/regional economic development.

The *Creative Placemaking* (Markusen and Gadwa 2010) framework arose to advance the role of the arts in communities beyond the *creative cities* and gentrification narratives.

Encouraged by the National Endowment for the Arts, the theory of creative placemaking emphasizes cross-sectoral collaboration to address areas of community concern. The goals are to advance livability and unite diverse constituents toward common goals. Insofar as these projects are truly community-led, they may avoid contributing to gentrification processes; however, the goals of improving livability and increasing business viability are strikingly similar to goals advocated by Florida (2002), who Markusen and Gadwa (2010) cite in *Creative Placemaking*. Following significant interest in creative placemaking, the NEA founded its Our Town initiative and the ArtPlace consortium, which together distribute \$26 million in grants annually to creative placemaking projects nationwide (Frenette 2017; Gadwa Nicodemus 2013). Gadwa Nicodemus argues that creative placemaking represents a significant development in U.S. cultural policy, uniting often disparate stakeholders and expanding the impact of the arts beyond the culture sector. She also finds that both the NEA and other local, state, and national funders have contributed “significant” resources to this “ascendant cultural policy” (Webb 2013).

As influential as creative placemaking ideology has become, it is not without its critics, including Roberto Bedoya, Executive Director of the Tuscon Pima Arts Council. In 2012, he published a critique of creative placemaking practices on the website of Arts in a Changing America, an initiative aimed at “[reframing] the national arts conversation by embracing the cultural assets of demographic change” (Bedoya 2013). Here, Bedoya speaks from his experience as an art organization leader:

Creative Placemaking practices must understand history, critical racial theory, and politics alongside the spatial planning and economic development theories that dominate the discourse. How race, class, poverty, and discrimination shape place — through a politics of belonging or dis-belonging — needs to be reflected upon whether one is engaged with Creative Placemaking practices as an artist, funder, developer, NGO, or governmental agency. (Bedoya 2013)

As scholars critiqued Florida’s (2002) creative class thesis as a driver of gentrification, so Bedoya (2013) calls attention to the racism and classism inherent in programs that presume to make place. As in the conflict over Florida’s (2002) creative cities approach, disagreements over the nature and potential impacts of creative placemaking remain unresolved.

My observations of Network meetings and my interviews with Network staff suggested that the group is aware of and bothered by outsiders who would define it as either a gentrification engine or as a creative placemaking project; however, a surface-level analysis of the group suggests that it could be either. The Network, a group of young artists from outside Pine Hill, rented an affordable gallery and office space in a historically disinvested community and their future plans include purchasing and renovating several nearby homes as artist live/work spaces. This is precisely the process of neighborhood change that gentrification scholars associate with artists and art organizations (Grodach, Foster, and Murdoch 2018; Ley 2003; Zukin 1987). On the other hand, the group’s stated goal to create a place where local residents can encounter and

create art to express themselves and engage in meaningful, connected conversations – a goal written as “Welcome Home” on the gallery’s front windows – is more in keeping with the cooperative ideals of creative placemaking (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). I argue that, in failing to center The Network’s understanding of Pine Hill, both models misrepresent their work.

### ***The Network and Pine Hill***

From my very first meeting with Andy, Executive Director of The Network, it was clear that my way of thinking about how The Network might relate to Pine Hill was out of touch and based on paradigms that saw Pine Hill only as the sum of its struggles. Listening to Andy talk about Pine Hill reminded of reading magical realists like Toni Morrison or Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It was in her way of speaking (Andy is a writer herself) but also in the way her narrative opened up a Pine Hill that I had never seen and certainly did not understand. For Andy, and every member of The Network I would speak to over the next ten months, Pine Hill is a place of deep connection, meaning, and power. I will never experience Pine Hill as The Network does, but those I interviewed have been generous enough to describe it to me, and it is an incredibly important part of this story.

It is true that most Network staff members have not lived in Pine Hill, and of the ten Network staff members I interviewed, only David was raised there. Though Johnny spent their pre-school years at a great aunt’s home in the neighborhood and Stephanie lived in the neighborhood for a time while attending the nearby city university, most interview participants had little direct experience in the Pine Hill before The Network began occupying The Space. This does not mean that Network members were previously unfamiliar with Pine Hill. On the

contrary, as Andy said, “If you are from The City, you know that Pine Hill exists and [you know] the importance of it.” For members of The Network, the “importance of it” is based in its history, the sense of belonging it provides, and the relative freedom it represents.

***Touching History: “I feel like this is the center of the world.” (Jade)***

Every member of the Network that I interviewed spoke about the history of Pine Hill – its “legacy,” as Andy described it. Pine Hill’s history began in the years immediately following Emancipation, when portions of a former plantation were chopped into parcels and sold to Black families (Williams 2013). With scarce resources, residents of Pine Hill created the first community in the United States built for and by Black Americans. In Pine Hill, a resident could see a Black doctor, shop in a Black-owned store, and attend high-quality majority-Black schools. Shortly after its founding, Pine Hill was incorporated into the large, majority-White city adjacent to it, but it retained its distinctive nature and majority-Black population (Williams 2013). During the Civil Rights Era, Pine Hill was home to significant organizing efforts, and residents report that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spent time in Pine Hill when he was in The City. In the 1970s, the area began to struggle significantly with underinvestment and high poverty. To this day, the census tracts that comprise Pine Hill are up to 97% Black, and, while the area has lower levels of educational attainment, lower home values, and incomes that are barely half the average for the larger city and state (ACS 2018 5-year estimates), interview participants spoke about Pine Hill as a place of power, even as a “sacred space” (Andy). Pine Hill’s power and sacredness for Network staff members comes, in large part, from its history.

Justin is a 29-year old multi-disciplinary artist and the only person other than Andy (the Executive Director) who has been with The Network since its beginning in 2014. Though he downplays the idea that he is an activist – “I’m an activist maybe sometimes through my art” – his eyes become incredibly focused and intense when he talks about The Network. He exudes energy and tenacity, and his “stubbornness” is evidenced by the fact that he has managed to dedicate time to The Network while also establishing himself as an artist on the rise. Justin is currently the group’s program director, a position that requires him to plan and oversee visual arts exhibitions, music series, artist workshops, and organizational partnerships. Perhaps because of this, he seemed to be at The Space every time I was there.

Thanks to The Space, Justin spends a considerable amount of time in Pine Hill now, but he had not done so before. He was raised in a suburban area east of The City, an area he describes as having “no history” – a nameless middle-class area sandwiched between two prosperous White-majority suburbs. Though his neighborhood was majority-White while Justin was growing up, the area is more diverse now. In Justin’s mind, Pine Hill is the opposite of that nameless place. It is a place steeped in history. Speaking about why he values Pine Hill, Justin says,

So many different lives have been lived there. So many different artists and basketball players and different people of any professional career have existed in those places and spaces. So I think that's the thing - at least for me personally - that's been unique is to be in a place that has 100 years of history, right? One hundred years of narratives and firsts and Black achievements and tragedies and all kinds of things that I didn't know about before. (Justin)

For Justin, to be in Pine Hill is to be connected to one hundred years of local Black history and one hundred years of Black lives. In later conversations, it became clear that Justin places significant importance on “doing” – making it happen, being stubborn enough to see something

through. That quality is something he feels in Pine Hill, something born of a history Justin didn't have access to in the suburbs. When I ask why the Network chose Pine Hill as its location, Justin again cites history: "There's a lot of historical firsts in Pine Hill in terms of Black people and Black advancement and ownership and things. And so for us it felt like that was the best place to be."

All of my interviewees echoed Justin's statements about the importance of Pine Hill's history in The Network's decision to locate there, but interviewees reported different levels of familiarity with this history. While both David (who was raised in Pine Hill) and Andy specifically mentioned knowing Pine Hill's history from an early age, others, including Justin (above) and Danny, said they knew very little about Pine Hill growing up. Danny is The Network's 26-year old program assistant. He is a beautiful human being, with large, sensitive eyes and a charmingly shy smile. There is empirical evidence for this opinion: Danny is a frequent model for The Network's promotional photography and is in increasing demand by photographers around The City. His background is in journalism, though, and he believes deeply in the importance of storytelling. Like many people who were raised in The City, Danny planned to leave- in his case, to try to make a life with a friend in Los Angeles. Life's uncertainties intervened, though, and Danny found himself back in The City after college. He floundered for a bit before finding The Network. Now he says he has been more productive and has had more opportunities than he ever expected.

One thing Danny never expected, though, was to be in Pine Hill. Like Justin, he grew up outside of The City in more solidly middle-class places. His parents worked hard to ensure he got the best education possible, borrowing addresses from family and neighbors to send him to better schools than their neighborhood had to offer (a common practice in The City, whose

educational system is notoriously inequitable.) Danny admitted that his only prior knowledge of Pine Hill was that he should never go there, that it was “the hood.” Now, having experienced Pine Hill through his work with The Network, Danny is able to make sense of experiences that challenged his view of Pine Hill as “the hood.”

It’s respected. Pine Hill is like a big staple for Black people. So much that people would lie, and be like, "I'm from Pine Hill" because you get some type of respect. I look back and it’s like, who the hell was telling me that Pine Hill was the hood? It's something very special about that little pocket of land, buildings, and people in this community. It's very, very inspiring and for it to have lasted this long untouched, it's very like... Being there now, it’s like, perspective-changing, you know? I never knew Pine Hill was the first Black community in The City. I didn't know that there are like shops and businesses and homes built, ran, established by Black people. I see why people would lie and say they're from Pine Hill. It makes a lot of sense to me. (Danny)

Though Danny is just recently learning about Pine Hill, his statement is a concise example of how The Network thinks about the neighborhood. First, it is respected. Its history has endowed it with such importance that to align yourself with Pine Hill is to align yourself with a history of proud, independent Blackness in The City. Second, Pine Hill’s history and importance have been systematically undervalued, and narratives that focus only on high crime and disinvestment contribute to ongoing undervaluing. Third, to be involved in Pine Hill is to see it differently, to see the strength, resilience, and resistance that is alive in the neighborhood. While Danny, like Justin, was not previously familiar with Pine Hill, his involvement with The Network in The Space has led to a profound respect and admiration for a neighborhood that remains, even as systemic challenges and injustice threaten to erase it.

For members of The Network, Pine Hill is a place where Black history happened, but their respect is not a purely nostalgic exercise. They report that the historic legacy of Pine Hill is alive in its current residents, who work diligently to improve and strengthen their neighborhood.

Jade is a 21-year old filmmaker and The Network's community engagement director. She is the most mature 21-year old I've ever met, and, again, there is empirical evidence for this opinion. Jade recently won a prestigious award from the local indie movie festival, and she soon after presented a TED talk about gentrification to a city-wide audience. Jade's responses to my questions are careful and thoughtful, and she provided a beautiful illustration of the connection between Pine Hill's history and present day:

I think it's one of the first for-Black-people by-Black-people neighborhoods in the entire country, and there is just this great sense of civic pride. I don't feel like there is any place in The City where people are more proud to say, "I am from Pine Hill, and whatever that comes with that, I'm taking it." I think there is a uniquely Black vibrato about Pine Hill and its history and its residents. Sometimes, when I'm in The Space, I feel like this is the center of the world. Pine Hill could be Harlem. We just have to get out of Pine Hill's way and give them the tools that they've been strategically stripped of. (Jade)

For Jade, past, present, and future exist together and intertwined in Pine Hill. Pine Hill's history inspires incredible "civic pride," which in turn inspires people to proudly claim the neighborhood. The history and current Pine Hill residents work together to create a "uniquely Black vibrato" that Jade seems to view as a kind of potential energy that would lead to greatness, if only The City weren't intent on holding the neighborhood back.

David, the only Network staff member to have been raised in Pine Hill, echoes Jade's sentiment that what Pine Hill needs most is for the world to get out of its way. David is almost a personification of that energy. After being raised in Pine Hill, David moved to New York, where he went to college, worked, and began apprenticing in recording studios. After seven years in New York, energized by the competitive energy of that place, family needs brought David back to The City. He founded UpFront Records and has gathered a roster of artists who are leading a new wave of hip-hop in a city known for its hip-hop history. David is one of those people who

seems incapable of quitting, and he attributes that, in part, to his upbringing in Pine Hill. There, he learned that anything he wanted in life, he'd have to create for himself and that it would take work. In David's view, the people in Pine Hill and other Black-majority neighborhoods expend incredible amounts of energy just trying to survive.

I worked hard as hell, but my greatest ideas came when I could wake up and think. My dad worked two and three jobs. I glimpsed at him when he went to work in the morning, and then he came home around eleven-thirty every day. And on the weekends, we went to work with him. We cleaned up office buildings not far from Pine Hill. That's how we spent time with our dad - working. These people are geniuses. The only difference between them and people in other communities is that people in other communities get off from work. And they feel secure enough, in a way that fosters, "Hmm. What can I do with this? I have this idea. Man, I want to create this." (David)

At several points in our interview, David made it clear that this is not an accidental state of affairs. In his telling, poverty is a tool used by elites to keep places like Pine Hill from rising up and reaching their potential. But Pine Hill, with its important history, is particularly dangerous to the White power structure, so The City also engages in a campaign of erasure.

David shared a story about visiting a recently built, beautiful visitor's center in The City's downtown. He and Andy went together, and looking through the souvenirs for sale, they saw a range of products welcoming guests to The City with the slogan, "Party like a redneck!" ("Redneck" is a term typically applied to poor, rural Whites.) In telling this story, David laughed at the absurdity of that message in a City whose tourism is built on the products of Black creativity: "'Party like a redneck' almost looks like you're trying to hide how Black this city is, right?" Though he laughed in the telling, seeing that slogan reinforced for David that The City wages a campaign of erasure, purposefully ignoring Pine Hill's importance.

When I look at who gets investment here and the things that get mentioned in tourism and all that shit, I just find it hilarious that literally the first community founded for Black

people in the United States of America isn't mentioned. If that isn't being spit in the face, if that isn't truly undervaluing Black people in Black spaces, what is? (David)

For David, Jade, Danny, and Justin – indeed, for every member of The Network that spoke with me – Pine Hill's history is a source of inspiration and an imperative toward resistance. Whether members grew up familiar with Pine Hill or came to know the history later, they speak reverently about it as a place where Black people came together to build their lives as free people, where creativity and resistance collaborate to maintain a “uniquely Black” (Jade) place in The City. They acknowledge and speak often about the challenges facing the community, of the systemic injustices that have led to poverty and lack of opportunity in that place. But that is not the whole story. As Danny said, being in Pine Hill is perspective-changing. He and the others see that place as a site of incredible strength and individual and collective agency, and they are incensed by the degree to which its history and current potential are undervalued. People are working to change that, as they always have in Pine Hill, and that spirit of resistance makes it an ideal home for The Space. As a group of young Black artists looking to upset an inequitable status-quo, The Network's staff argue that they had to locate in Pine Hill. As Jade put it, “why would we be anywhere else?”

***Belonging: “A real Black neighborhood.” (Justin)***

The Network located The Space in Pine Hill to be aligned with and located within a history of Black excellence and resistance. It was a strategic decision to settle in a location that matched their goals. The choice was also an emotional one, though, as several interviewees reported feeling a sense of belonging in Pine Hill that they had not experienced elsewhere. This sense of belonging has different roots for each person. David's sense of belonging in Pine Hill comes

from his upbringing there – it is his home. Johnny, who spent time at their aunt’s home in Pine Hill as a young child, described their connection to Pine Hill as a nostalgic familiarity born of those early childhood memories. For most of the others, though, Pine Hill is a place where Blackness is the norm, where Black people can live without being constantly “othered” – a place very different from those they knew growing up. Fletcher was the first to communicate this idea to me.

One warm May evening, I arrived at The Space to observe The Network’s development meeting. I walked into The Space just behind two older women who immediately greeted and hugged Andy. After chatting with them for a moment, Andy came over to greet me, whispering that these women were her aunts and that they’d come to see the current exhibition, *Safekeeping*, which featured art interrogating the effects of mass incarceration and the policing of Black people. Andy asked that I head back to the conference room with Fletcher, who had just walked in, and explain to her what I was doing there. Fletcher is perhaps the friendliest-looking person I have ever seen. She has a kind, open face and a big smile. Throughout, I came to know Fletcher as an important part of The Network’s development team, a small group responsible for fundraising to keep the lights on and to advance The Network’s mission. It was time-consuming, apparently endless work, and – before my study concluded – Fletcher would leave The Network. The stuff of her own life – changing jobs, mothering her son, and trying to focus more on her music-making – simply did not leave enough time to devote to The Network. In our interview some months later, she mentioned philosophical differences as another reason she decided to leave the group. (I’ll address this more in later chapters.) On the day of our first meeting, though, Fletcher was all positivity. Settling into the conference room – a White room with one eight-foot table and a wall covered in graphic art-style portraits of The Network’s team – she asked what I

was doing. I gave her my spiel about the research, and she seemed interested. Then she asked the question I was dreading, “Where did you go to high school?”

In The City where both Fletcher and I grew up, “Where did you go to high school?” is a common question for new acquaintances, and the answer says a lot about a person. Talking about one’s high school is a way to talk about what area of the highly segregated city you are from, what your family’s socio-economic status is, and what kind of experiences we might have in common. I attended a private Catholic high school in a northern suburb of The City, and I was not excited about admitting that to members of The Network. At this early point in the research, I did not have information on where Network members grew up, and I assumed many lived in or near Pine Hill. Thus, while my Whiteness is obvious and unavoidable, admitting that I went to a private school in the suburbs would, I feared, characterize me as truly out of touch with the lived experiences of Network members. Fletcher set me straight.

“I went to St. Cecilia’s,” I said, “up off East Town Road.” Fletcher leaned in, “Oh, I went to East Town High, so we were probably neighbors!” Fletcher had grown up in a relatively prosperous suburb and attended a well-respected public high school. We did indeed have people and experiences in common, including all the high school hangouts along East Town Road and the constant traffic. While East Town became progressively more diverse after Fletcher and I graduated from high school, it was a long way from Pine Hill. After chatting for a bit about growing up out there, I asked what brought Fletcher to The Network. She said that she found “resonance” with their mission. As a bi-racial person – her mother is White and her father is Black – Fletcher had been constantly uncomfortable in White East Town. Coming to Pine Hill and working with The Network just “felt right.”

This turned out to be a common theme in my interviews, as Network members who were raised in the near or far suburbs spoke about finding a sense of belonging and comfort in Pine Hill. These conversations generally included discussions about growing up as one of very few Black people in a neighborhood and attending majority-White schools. Justin provides an excellent example:

The last four or five years doing this work has been the most Black people that I've been around in my whole life. I'm still learning because I grew up and spent basically 20 years of my life navigating a suburban neighborhood. So I got kind of closed off from a lot of the community that a lot of other people got to grow with. It was different than growing up in like a real Black neighborhood where you could say, "I'm from North City, I'm from South City, I'm from Pine Hill. I didn't have that. (Justin)

For Justin, growing up in the suburbs felt both geographically and culturally distant from the “real Black neighborhoods” of North City, South City, or Pine Hill. Later in our interview, he makes clear that his only contact with contemporary “Black” culture was through media. Even then, though, his media exposure came primarily through his parents, who did not listen to the local music being created in places like Pine Hill. Since becoming involved in “real Black neighborhoods,” Justin has taken on the role of a learner, absorbing as much Black culture as possible to make up for lost time. As in his discussion about Pine Hill’s history, Justin says explicitly that he “didn’t have that” or “didn’t know.” His descriptions of growing up in the suburbs are centered on what he missed, on a lack of connection. Now, being in Pine Hill is a chance to connect with and belong to a “real Black neighborhood.”

In contrast to Justin’s experience, those that did grow up in “real Black neighborhoods” tie their sense of belonging in Pine Hill to its familiarity. David, the only Network member to have grown up in Pine Hill, speaks at length about the places he rode his bike, the bus stops where he waited, and the people of Pine Hill, whose experience he knows. He insists that

“Everything I do is meant to reflect on Pine Hill. I know the best part of The City is where the Black people are, so let me make that obvious.” Similarly, Johnny, who stayed with their aunt in Pine Hill during the day in the years before school, feels a sense of familiarity with the place that helps them belong there and guides their work. Johnny talks about Pine Hill like it is a family member: “I look down the street and that looks like my uncle or something. It feels like a family member that got abandoned and needs a little bit of love.” For David and Johnny, they belong in Pine Hill because they know it, and they know that The Space is in the right place.

Even those who did not grow up in Pine Hill occasionally cite an experience of familiarity. Andy provides a useful example of this. Like Justin, she was raised in more suburban areas of The City and spent significant time in predominantly White places. When I asked her why The Network decided to settle in Pine Hill, she shared a story about coming to see the storefront that would become The Space. They originally became interested in the location based on previous positive experiences in Pine Hill Gallery, the community gallery located immediately next door to The Space in the plaza. There, they had felt welcome in a way they rarely felt in White spaces. Whether it was by Black audience members being asked to leave an event or by security guards approaching Black artists as they entered or left a venue, Andy says that The Network felt constantly surveilled in White places. Pine Hill Gallery showed them the importance of Black people running a Black art space, and – shortly thereafter – The Space became available. Andy recalls the day she knew they needed to locate The Space in Pine Hill:

There was a day we were sitting outside and the "for lease" sign was still on the building. But the property owner had given me a key so I could take some folks by. So, we had come back outside and we're just like looking at it from the outside, and we heard somebody in a big box Chevy roll past playing – and I can hear it in my head – some Tupac song. And one of my team members was like, "Yo, we're home. This is it." (Andy)

The experience of hearing that car drive by was a sign. It was a symbol of Blackness in a historic Black place, and it was a marker of a shared cultural heritage. When Andy tells this story, it is as if she is talking about a religious revelation – that moment you just know. The Network, a group working to create an unapologetically Black creative space, belongs in Pine Hill where Blackness is belonging.

For Fletcher, Justin, Andy, and other Network staff members I spoke with, being in Pine Hill offers a sense of connection to Black life and culture that they did not have growing up in the suburbs. Coming to Pine Hill is an act of rejecting spaces where they are “othered” in favor of a place where Blackness is central. Fletcher was searching for a place to be more comfortable in her skin, and Justin was searching for a connection to something that was really Black. Andy, in looking for a home for The Network, was looking for a place where their mission to promote Black art and artists would be welcomed and embraced. They found these things in Pine Hill, a historic center of Black culture, community, and resistance.

***Safety: “Black fists out in the air, celebrating us existing.” (Andy)***

The Network’s location in Pine Hill aligns them with a history of Black agency and resistance, and the neighborhood provides a sense of belonging for individual Network staff members as well as for the group’s mission. Pine Hill also offers a sense of safety. In majority White places, the group was often made to feel “like a threat,” being watched by security or questioned by gatekeepers. David, while speaking about how The Network is challenging the White-dominated status quo, observes that “You can ignore one of us in the room, but when we start showing up together it makes people nervous. Some people should be nervous.” Since The Network’s goal is

to bring groups of Black people together, Andy and Justin are constantly worried about ensuring that the group is safe – staying on the lookout for anyone “tiki-torchy” (an allusion to the 2017 Unite the Right White supremacist and neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Virginia) who might threaten them. The idea of Pine Hill as a safe space was tested in late 2018 when The Network gathered a large group of Black artists to a main Pine Hill road for a photo shoot in honor of The Space’s approaching grand opening.

They called the photos *A Great Day in the Hill*, a reference to *A Great Day in Harlem*, a famous 1958 photograph of jazz luminaries, and the photos were meant to be a bold claiming of space by a group of Black artists in a deeply inequitable city. It was an exciting occasion that nonetheless made Andy nervous. Before moving into The Space, The Network had several gallery shows and events in predominantly White spaces, spaces where Network members and friends were often discriminated against in myriad ways. Whether it was by Black audience members being asked to leave an event or by security guards approaching Black artists as they entered or left a venue, Andy felt constantly surveilled. Because of these experiences, Andy and other Network leaders considered various problems that might arise from the Great Day in the Hill photoshoot.

There were so many precautions, so many things we were doing out of fear that somebody would call the police if they saw that many Black folks... And then at one point, somebody was like, "Yo, we over-planned for this." People were happy to see us out on the street taking pictures – honking their horns, Black fists out in the air, celebrating us existing. I get goosebumps every time I talk about that. At no point did we feel like we were being targeted or did we feel like we were a threat. Because that's the thing. We're often made to feel like we're a threat to someone, but really truly we're existing and we're being celebrated in that existence. (Andy)

For Andy, the *Great Day in the Hill* shoot exemplifies the physical freedom that Pine Hill represents— freedom to exist without being questioned or treated as a threat, freedom of

movement, freedom of assembly. Even staff members like Danny, who was raised thinking of Pine Hill as “the hood,” emphasized that they felt safer in Pine Hill, freer from White surveillance. Fletcher pointed out that this sense of safety did not mean a naïve ignorance about crime in the area – “It’s Pine Hill. People are struggling here. You should still lock your car and be careful in the parking lot.” Still, most interviewees reported that they feel safer as Black people in Pine Hill.

The freedom that Pine Hill offers is not only physical, though. By locating in Pine Hill, The Network claims a creative freedom which is not possible elsewhere in The City’s predominantly White arts establishment. Justin feels this keenly. Over the past several years, he has established himself as a rising young artist The City, featuring in exhibitions in established arts institutions and winning important residency positions. Regardless of his success, however, he felt the limitations of a White-dominated arts system, especially when Black artists attract Black audiences.

I think it is one thing to have individual success as a Black artist in a space that may not be for you and a gallery system that may not be for you. But then to bring 20 of your friends with you, the climate kind of changes in terms of like support or respect – even in facing a narrative or staking a space in different things. And so I started to notice - we all started to notice - we didn’t feel welcome in certain spaces. (Justin)

For Justin, the sense of safety offered by Pine Hill is physical – in the safety and welcome afforded Black audiences – but also creative. Being in Pine Hill allows him the space to welcome Black audiences and confront narratives and themes that are not always welcome in predominantly White spaces.

The idea that Black creativity is more possible in The Space and in Pine Hill also came through in my interview with Johnny, a 26-year old painter who is one of The Network’s two

artists-in-residence and a graduate of The City's art college. Johnny is small in stature, a bold dresser, and radiates a thoughtfulness that takes up space. Though quiet at first, Johnny is easy to connect with and their laugh is melodic and contagious. Their art tends to explore deeply personal topics, themes of identity, and ideas about sexuality. It is complex and needs to be viewed in all that complexity. According to Johnny, though, Black art is often relegated to niche status in academic and gallery spaces; it is "frowned upon and treated as cliché." Even those galleries that do present art by Black artists seem intent on framing it in "problematic ways" – ways that force art by Black people into limited conceptual boxes.

They frame it in a problematic way. Just on an overall scale, it seems like a lot of Black trauma work is always in demand. And there's only really demand for that specific type and no exploration of whatever else you want to explore within your Blackness. (Johnny)

Johnny feels that The Network offers a space in which Black artists can be safe to explore their unique artistic voices without being limited by White gatekeepers. It offers creative safety, a place to explore and to be seen as a fully complex and complicated person. Like Justin, Johnny believes that Black artists need spaces where they are free and safe to just make art – not Black art, just art. As long as they are required to play by the rules of a White arts establishment and subject to being narrativized by White gatekeepers, they are not safe to explore their artistic lives. The Network offers a space in which Black artists are free to explore and, insofar as the neighborhood offers a safe place for Black people to gather to make and experience art, that creative freedom is facilitated by greater physical freedom in Pine Hill.

### ***Back to the Pop-Up: Is The Network sufficiently connected?***

The Network gains much by being in Pine Hill. The neighborhood's history guides and inspires their work, its majority-Black population and strong cultural tradition offer touchpoints for individual and collective belonging, and it facilitates greater physical and creative freedom. It is for these reasons that The Network chose to locate in Pine Hill, but the question from the Pop-Up remains: Is The Network sufficiently connected to Pine Hill? The answer to this depends on two things: how we define "sufficient" and how we define "connected." I'll start by considering the meaning of connection.

The Network was founded in 2014, four years after Markusen and Gadwa published *Creative Placemaking* (2010). In the intervening years, creative placemaking (CPM) replaced Florida's (2002) creative cities thesis (CC) as the dominant model of art and place; however, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, the paradigms are based on a shared logic of place and thus CPM represents a continuation, rather than a change. The logic of place underlying CC and CPM has three distinctive characteristics. First, the models center problems. The very necessity to undertake CC or CPM work emerges from acknowledgments of problems requiring solutions. While CC and CPM differ on who should define these problems – city planners or community leaders – the logic of these models constructs art-based projects as necessarily in service of some problem. Second, problems are assumed to arise from community deficits, usually deficits of investment, deficits of education, or significant in-community conflict. Having identified a problem independently or in cooperation with the community, arts organizations following CC or CPM must then identify the deficit area that their work will address. Thus, arts organizations are tied to communities via their assessment of addressable deficits. Finally, having identified a problem and establishing the deficit area to be addressed, CC and CPM projects must attract

significant cross-sectoral financial support. The logic suggests that with careful attention to appropriate problems and deficits, economic investment funneled through arts organizations will have a positive impact on community life. Because program success relies on financial support, Frenette (2017) points out that it is in the best interest of arts organizations to orient themselves toward the goals of private funders and corporations (who make up the bulk of U.S. arts funders.) It is through this logic model that “connection” is defined. Arts organizations like The Network are connected to communities when they are oriented toward solving a community problem and mobilize their resources to address the root deficit of said problem.

The level of community involvement that constitutes “sufficiency” is related to an organization’s financial needs and its ethical orientation. As Sidford and Frasz (2017) demonstrate, an ever-shrinking portion of public arts money is dedicated to organizations that primarily address minority audiences. Frenette (2017) argues that this makes arts organizations increasingly dependent on private investment. This is a particular problem for minority-led organizations, who – as White (2018) details – may have greater difficulty generating private financial support from within their social networks. In contrast, White-led arts organizations have sophisticated funding apparatuses meant to do just that and long histories of philanthropic connections. This means that White-led organizations depend less on the kind of corporate funding that is often tied to community revitalization projects. What constitutes sufficient community connection to secure the portion of funding necessary to support a White ballet company may be very different than the level of community connection (defined by the CC and CPM models) necessary to sustain a Black or Latino arts group. With such a small portion of public funding flowing to minority-led organizations, they may be even more beholden to the

aims of private investment, much of which is focused on generating profit from disinvested places.

Sufficiency is also an ethical question. Recall that critiques of the *Creative Cities* (2002) and *Creative Placemaking* (2010) centered on their capacity to displace existing residents and undermine complex communities (Bedoya 2013; Grodach, Foster, and Murdoch 2018; Ley 2003; Novy and Colomb 2013). Questions about sufficient community connection may be rooted in concerns that arts organizations do not understand the sites of their work as well as they should. These critiques serve to protect communities from intervention by actors who may create more problems than they solve. As Bedoya (2013) argued, projects that are rooted in public policy or economic concerns are not inherently bad but often fail to account for the histories, cultures, and communities existing in their target areas. While this critique defines sufficiency as a level of awareness necessary to undertake interventions in good faith and the other definition of sufficiency describes it as the amount of involvement necessary to generate funding, both situate sufficiency as a prerequisite for intervention. Thus, in the CC and CPM models, asking if an organization like The Network is sufficiently connected to the community is akin to asking if the organizations has developed the funding and/or awareness necessary to offer solutions to community problems.

***Flipping the Script: “They don’t need us.” (Danny)***

Is the Network developing the funding and/or awareness necessary to offer solutions to Pine Hill’s problems? Because this question is rooted in deficit models of place – models that are polar opposites of the way The Network views Pine Hill – I argue that it is irrelevant. The

Network is not trying to solve a problem in Pine Hill. They are located there because of what Pine Hill offers them: connection to history, a sense of belonging, and greater physical and creative safety. Though they hope that their work provides a safe space for Pine Hill neighbors to come, be creative, and reflect on their own narratives, their project is city-wide, aimed at elevating the work and power of Black artists and changing an arts system that systemically devalues them. Pine Hill is not important to The Network's story because it is the home of a problem they hope to address. Rather, it is *their home*, a site of power and belonging. The Network needs Pine Hill more than Pine Hill needs The Network, and staff members take care to point this out to me.

When I asked Danny what he knew about the decision to put The Space in Pine Hill, he first talked about the neighborhood's history, of the respect Black people have for it, and of the new perspective he has on it. Then he said, "We're not saviors. They don't need us here. They don't need us here at all." This sentiment situated The Network as the opposite of organizations that would come to save Pine Hill, organizations that Network staff members readily critiqued. Johnny was specifically critical of those organizations that set projects in Pine Hill, stay for a little while, and then leave, claiming to have made an impact. Like Jade and David, Johnny and Danny appealed to the idea that Pine Hill does not need more intervention. Rather, it needs people and institutions to "get out of [it's] way" (Jade). Andy and Stephanie repeatedly insist that the people of Pine Hill are resilient, creative, and can do for themselves. The Network is not coming to solve a problem or address a deficit in Pine Hill. They have settled there to be part of the "fabric of what is already happening" (Andy), to draw on the neighborhood's assets of community and resistance, and to align themselves with a proud narrative of Black agency.

This is not to say that The Network is miraculously immune from the impact of dominant art and place models like CC and CPM. In the final interview of this project, I circled back to Andy, asking her how she felt – a year later – about putting The Space in Pine Hill. She said that “all the initial things about it being an insanely strong place” remain true; but that The Network has learned lessons from Pine Hill. “I think we came in hot and heavy,” Andy said, “feeling like we had the solutions to a lot of issues. And I think we got in the way of other community organizations that were already here doing the work.” She gave the example of the group’s after-school program at Pine Hill High. While they remain committed to doing work with young people, they were not equipped experientially or financially to do that work on their own. Now, they have partnered with an established organization that has the expertise and resources to do work in Pine Hill, and Andy believes the programming is better for it. She continued:

It’s growing pains. We don’t know what we’re doing. We have lots of big ideas, lots of energy, lots of passion. But we do not have a blueprint. And so I’m okay with saying we’ve learned a lot in this first year and that we got a lot of shit wrong -- we got a lot right, but we also got a lot wrong. And that includes how we were engaging current community organizations. (Andy)

Later in our interview, Andy attributed some of their “hot and heavy” sense of having all the answers to being Millennials. She said there is a temptation to think that the people who came before – though they did good work – need to pass the baton and get out of the way. Though the group believes strongly in Pine Hill’s assets, there was still a tendency to offer solutions. The Network’s relationship to Pine Hill has not been perfect; however, the fact that the leadership is adjusting its approach constitutes a significant difference from models in which organizations provide solutions to deficit-defined communities. According to Andy, it is not the role of The Network to intervene to save Pine Hill. Their role is to listen and to be good neighbors and collaborators.

Regardless of whether they reject dominant models of art and place, there is still considerable concern within The Network that it may not be doing enough for Pine Hill. In one meeting I observed, Fletcher took the opportunity offered by a discussion about potential property-based projects in Pine Hill, to argue that the group needed to “put money where our mouth is” when it comes to being involved in the community. At least five of the Network members I interviewed responded to my question about how The Network relates to Pine Hill by reminding me that they have only been in The Space for a year. Over that year they have had to do considerable work to stabilize the organization itself and to gather the financial resources necessary to support their new property responsibilities. Once a year has passed, they insisted, they would be better able to focus on ways to be involved in Pine Hill. In their answers, they often seemed to expect a critique of their community work, and they always emphasized how much they care about Pine Hill.

This tension over what the organization should do vis-à-vis Pine Hill is related to the way funders evaluate their projects, and I witnessed frequent frustration over this in The Network’s development meetings. For example, in both of the grant applications I had access to, Andy was required to discuss at length how their projects aligned with the funders’ goals, which always included community development. These funder evaluations are based in the creative cities and creative placemaking models, centering problems and deficits and requiring that arts organizations provide solutions.

### *The Trouble with Models*

A surface-level analysis of The Network would find it easy to describe the group as either a creative cities-style gentrification engine (run by young artists from outside Pine Hill) or as a creative placemaking project (creating a space for the community to gather and practice creativity). While there may be kernels of truth in either assessment, the creative cities and creative placemaking models do not stand up to an analysis based on the experiences and insights of Network members themselves. The Network is not located in Pine Hill to provide solutions to a problem that arises from the community's deficits. It is there to absorb and learn from the community's assets. Members prioritize Pine Hill's history, the sense of belonging they have there, and the safety they feel in a proud Black place. CC and CPM do not account for these assets.

While I do not argue that The Network's approach to and view of Pine Hill are the result of anything essential about them as a Black organization, The Network staff members I spoke to painted a picture of their connection to place in ways that recall the *chocolate cities* framework (Hunter and Robinson 2018). It is Pine Hill's historical and symbolic value, as well as its contemporary "disposition toward community life" (Hunter and Robinson 2018:87), that drew The Network there. Though The Network hopes to have a positive impact on the neighborhood, they emphasize that they need Pine Hill more than Pine Hill needs them. This reality would be overlooked in analyses that focused primarily on The Network's contribution to improving Pine Hill's economic prospects (creative cities) or rectifying its current challenges (creative placemaking).

## 4.2 THE NETWORK AS ORGANIZATION

The Network christened The Space with a public grand opening celebration in January 2019, making real the message emblazoned on their front windows: “Welcome Home.” According to media reports and statements from Network staff, the galleries were so packed with people that you could barely see the art, and visitors waited in lines to get in the door. Cars backed up onto the busy adjacent street as attendees jockeyed for parking spots. Pictures from the event show busy crowds of fashionably dressed people – young and old, Black and White – looking intently at the art, conversing with one another, laughing together. Ms. Jane, an influential Pine Hill leader, told David that she hadn’t seen the plaza so alive since the 1960s.

In media coverage and staff members’ retelling, the event was a momentous occasion, a bold claiming of space, a crystallization of tireless work. One media report quoted Justin, The Network’s program director, as saying, “This is a homecoming for sure. A lot of work – four years of work – being put together. This is proof that what we’re trying to do works.” Elsewhere, Stephanie, a member of The Network’s development team, recalled Langston Hughes when she said, “This is what happens when people dare to dream, and instead of that dream being deferred, it is supported, encouraged and galvanized into the direction of its purpose.” On the heels of the grand opening, The Network was visible not only locally, but nationally, in outlets including *Vice* and *Essence Magazine*. The message was consistent: this group of young Black artists is doing things differently, and they finally have a space in which to flourish.

The Space is not only important to the organization as an office and event space, though. For the staff and member artists, it is a critical gathering place and a space to be creative. During the very first meeting I observed, a couple staff members interrupted just to say hello. They came into the Conference Room, hugged everyone (including me), chatted for a brief time, and then settled elsewhere in The Space. I was surprised to see them still there several hours later.

Another time, a staff member came to The Space simply because it was “easier to catch an Uber from here than where I was,” and others passed through to check on projects or pick up keys. During one observation, a guitarist practiced in the back room, providing background music for the development meeting. Though I tended to be in The Space on the days when several staff meetings took place (a natural time for staff members to gather), I saw through social media that The Space was – on more days than not – full of life. Staff and artists’ social media accounts frequently include pictures and videos of people hanging out and creating in The Space on weekday evenings and between events.

Danny, The Network’s program assistant – the person who grew up being told that Pine Hill is “the hood” – is one of the people I saw most frequently in The Space. In response to an interview question about whether The Network is an affirming place for LGBT people, he gave an emotional description of how important The Space is to him:

There was a point in time where I got into an argument with one of my coworkers, and I didn't go [to The Space] for two or three weeks. Andy checked on me to see how I was doing, and I told her a piece of me was missing when I wasn't up there. At one point, every time my mom would call me, it was like, "Hey, where are you?" "Oh, I'm at The Space." And I was not doing anything. I was just up there because I felt at home. I felt like I could be myself. I can be as loud as I want to be. I can laugh as loud. I can cry as loud as I wanted to cry. I could just live how I wanted without any stipulations. Nobody making fun of me, nobody laughing, nobody cracking jokes at me. It is very affirming. It's warm. It's like my second home. I'll say it's my 1.5 home because its closer to my home than my regular home is. (Danny)

The Network is a group of people that affirm and accept Danny, and The Space is the place in which that happens. For him, the value of The Space far exceeds its function as a gallery, performance venue, and office space. It is a home and a refuge, a center of Danny's life.

For The Network, opening The Space was an important achievement, symbolizing the young organization's early success and their ability to bring plans to fruition. It was also an act of creation that yielded a safe space for staff, artists, and friends to gather and express themselves. Danny and other staff members that I interviewed felt this keenly, and I saw it during my observations. Though The Network existed before The Space, it has quickly become critical to their work and their organizational culture.

But The Space is a rental property, and The Network has no guarantee to it beyond the term of their current lease. Their continued presence there relies on a commercial property owner's willingness to rent to a young, financially precarious art organization. Luckily, they reached a workable understanding with the plaza's Memphis-based owner; however, two months after my observations began, I heard from a contact at Pine Hill Gallery (located next door to The Space) that the plaza was sold to new owners – an unknown entity from out of town. I wondered what the implications of that sale might be for The Network.

The sale did not ultimately cause The Network to relocate, but it did disturb the group's members. The topic came up in my interview with Justin, and I asked how he felt about the idea that The Space could trade hands from one owner to another so easily. Though Justin grew up in a "place with no history" and felt distant from Black life and culture in The City, he described his father as "very, very pro-Black," as a conduit through which he learned about Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Tupac, and the many injustices perpetrated against Black people. Citing this history, he called my attention to the fact that property owners have long displaced Black people

in The City. For that reason, the idea that The Space could be sold out from under The Network was not a shock, but it was a reminder that they could be forced to move:

Then you have to navigate what that's like - and navigate it again because this is a cycle that continues to happen. And if all of the work that we're doing in The Space or in the community can be negated by somebody just deciding that they don't want to renew a lease, it's scary. So ownership is very important. Very important to the sustainability of the work we are trying to do. (Justin).

Justin emphasizes the need for stability in the work The Network is attempting to do. As a group of young Black artists who advocate for the needs, opportunities, and appropriate recognition of Black artists, The Space offers a crucial degree of freedom – freedom to decide how and when they present work, freedom to express themselves creatively, freedom to gather. While The Network existed for four years before The Space, its grand opening was, as Justin said, the culmination of four years of work. Stephanie painted it as the outcome of a “dream... galvanized in the direction of its purpose.” The Space *claims space*, which is the organization’s mission – claiming space for artists, claiming space for Black communities, claiming space for arts organizations like theirs. Because of this, I argue that the group does not exist only to advance a mission. Rather, their mission *is to exist*.

### ***Organizing for the mission or a mission to organize?***

The Network was organized, like all nonprofit organizations (Minkoff and Powell 2006) to serve a mission. For The Network, that mission is threefold and centered in bold letters on their website: “Elevate Black artists. Empower Black communities. Shift the culture of The City.”

This mission is outward-facing and inspires a wide range of programs. To “elevate Black artists,”

The Network creates space for and events focused on work by Black artists, they prioritize

artistic freedom and the ability to dictate one's own narrative, and they host regular artist professional development classes on topics ranging from matting and hanging art to negotiating contracts. In their quest to "empower Black communities," the group takes part in school-based arts programs, involves teens in mural projects, and hosts events like the Back-to-School Pop-Up shop. To "shift the culture of The City," the group mounts branding campaigns that emphasize Black creativity, they plan projects that have the potential to redraw the map of The City's art scene, and they emphasize the diversity of Black experiences.

The Network's mission is in keeping with those analyzed by Minkoff and Powell (2006), who define nonprofit missions as statements of organizational purpose that "serve to rally, engage, and enroll workers, volunteers, and donors" (p. 591). Minkoff and Powell find that nonprofits face various external pressures that may cause them to deviate from or change their missions, chief among these is the significant challenge of securing funding for a new nonprofit organization. They also find that organizations may change their mission or their approach to that mission as a result of increased formalization, as paid staff replaces unpaid staff and the organization becomes committed to its perpetuation; however, Minkoff and Powell (2006) differentiate "organizational strategies" for survival – tactics and projects that elicit and solidify public and private funding and other support – from organizational mission, stating:

An organization's mission is based on what its participants regard as valuable and important. Organizational strategies speak to the instrumentality of survival. In many organizations, strategies for survival evolve into the mission, and this evolution can drain the organization of a sense of purpose. (Minkoff and Powell 2006:607)

As Minkoff and Powell observe, the pressures facing new nonprofit organizations can be so existentially threatening as to cause a revision or complete abandonment of the organization's mission.

In *Creative Placemaking*, the foundational text of a now-pervasive cultural policy that encourages the seeding of creative organizations and projects in places that are “vacant or underutilized,” Markusen and Gadwa (2010) specifically address some of the pressures facing new nonprofit organizations. While I reject the application of the *creative placemaking* label to The Network, Markusen and Gadwa’s discussion of organizational challenges is particularly attentive to organizations that occupy and maintain a headquarters or presenting location, as The Network does. Included in the list of challenges is “assembling adequate funding,” “ensuring maintenance and stability,” and “avoiding displacement and gentrification” (Markusen and Gadwa 2010).

As Markusen and Gadwa (2010) point out, new organizations require significant startup funding and ongoing financial support. Unfortunately, large public funders, foundations, and wealthy individuals generally prefer to support more established, longstanding organizations and are hesitant to take risks. These funders prefer organizations with robust development teams that have the capacity to mount ongoing capital and annual funds campaigns and to be effective stewards of private gifts. Small organizations often lack both the capacity and expertise to do so and are thus at a disadvantage vis-à-vis these funders.

If organizations can navigate funding systems successfully enough to begin their work and acquire a space, they may face problems in generating support for necessary maintenance and their ongoing programs. Markusen and Gadwa (2010:17) observe that it is often “easier to garner private sector, public sector, and philanthropic support to build or renovate buildings than it is to convince the same parties to provide maintenance and operating support over the long run.” Thus, organizations may successfully find and renovate a space only to find it difficult to

keep the lights on. The same holds true for mission-oriented funding: it is often easier to secure funding for a limited project than for ongoing work.

Even when organizations secure start-up capital and meet their maintenance and sustainability goals, they may still experience precarity. Gentrification and its attendant displacement processes pose a significant risk to art nonprofits, whose success (according to the creative placemaking model) in attracting attention to and investment in their neighborhoods may price them out of their current locations (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). This is, in fact, an underlying assumption of the Florida (2002) creative cities model: that artists and arts organizations are continually driven by their limited financial resources, aesthetic preferences, or ideological convictions to seek out spaces in underinvested areas. Thus, artists are driven repeatedly from newly “livable and economically viable” neighborhoods, repeating the gentrification process elsewhere (Florida 2002).

Difficulties generating startup revenue, securing stability, and resisting displacement are some of the challenges that may cause an organization to revise or abandon its mission in favor of its continued existence, watering down ideological convictions to more closely align with the interests of already-powerful local leaders and philanthropists (Minkoff and Powell 2006). Markusen and Gadwa’s (2010) creative placemaking model posits, however, that if projects are led by a coalition of community leaders, arts organizations, and public and private funders, that alignment of interests may not be inherently detrimental. Whether a nonprofit has abandoned its mission as in the Minkoff and Powell (2006) analysis or secured it through cross-sectoral cooperation as in the Markusen and Gadwa (2010), both models position a nonprofit’s organizational strategies and structure as being – ideally – in service of the mission.

The Network’s mission to “elevate Black artists, engage Black communities, and shift the culture of The City” (The Network’s website) does “rally, engage, and enroll workers, volunteers, and donors” (Minkoff and Powell 2006); however, those same supporters and staff are also motivated by The Network’s desire to claim space, to avoid a situation in which “all of the work [The Network is] doing... can be negated by somebody just deciding that they don’t want to renew a lease” (Justin). While it may be tempting to view this focus on organizational needs as a deviation from mission in the interest of organizational continuation, it is clear from my observations and interviews with Network staff that there is not so much distance between their mission and their work to survive as Minkoff and Powell (2006) assume. For every organizational problem The Network faces – particularly sourcing funding, ensuring stability, and avoiding displacement – their search for solutions aligns with their mission-driven goal to shift the culture of The City in ways that benefit Black artists and communities.

***Finding funds: “We can’t wait on White folks to give us money.” (Andy)***

My study did not include a review of The Network’s finances, nor did I ever ask for specific information about what financial resources they have available. It was clear to me throughout, however, that funding is a significant focus of organizational energy and source of individual stress. In my earliest conversations with Andy, she stressed that the arts system and funding structures “were not meant for us” – not meant to serve and support Black-led organizations. Later, when we discussed my level of access to observe meetings, Andy decided it would be best if I observed the development meetings which she leads. Because these meetings focused on funding The Network, I was able to observe staff discussions about how and from whom they might raise money. Like most nonprofit organizations (Markusen and Gadwa 2010), The

Network generates support via private philanthropy, public and private grants, corporate sponsorships, and small-dollar donors. They do this by applying for grants, appealing directly to philanthropists, asking for donations at a limited number of events, and hosting fundraisers. In planning for all of this, expediency often takes a backseat to mission alignment, and the overall focus is on building toward self-sufficiency and attracting “Black dollars” (Andy).

One of the first Network meetings I observed was in late May 2019. This was the meeting at which I first met Fletcher, the very friendly woman who had attended high school just down the road from me. She was one member of a four-woman development committee that also included Stephanie, Mattie, and – as previously mentioned – Andy. Andy told me that this wouldn’t be a normal meeting. She hadn’t put together an agenda and instead wanted the group to focus on accomplishing several specific tasks. Stephanie and Andy needed to make some decisions about the Corner Store, The Network’s makers market housed in a corner of the front gallery, while Mattie put the finishing touches on a grant application for a state-wide funding agency. She is the ideal person for that job. Mattie is a bi-racial woman in her early thirties – calm with a wry sense of humor. She is the only Network member who is not originally from The City, though her father’s career in the Army makes it difficult to pin down a hometown. She has a master’s degree in arts administration from a prestigious eastern university and came to The City to work for a major local museum, seizing the opportunity to blend her collections work with a strong social justice bent. Two weeks after this meeting, she would move back to the east coast city to work on nonprofit board diversity development initiatives, but she kept in touch and provided Andy with useful advice on grants during my observation period.

Fletcher, who often took point on email communications, was to assemble an email promo for their upcoming fundraising gala. The gala, scheduled to coincide with Juneteenth (the

annual celebration of the date on which Emancipation was finally enforced in all of the former confederate states) was titled “On the Shoulders of Giants.” It paid homage to Black culture, creativity, and survival (High Ground News), drawing parallels between Black history and The Network’s ongoing work. The event consisted of a ticketed, seated dinner and an after-party. While the after-party would be open to wide attendance, the development committee had specific plans for who should attend the dinner. This gala was the main topic of conversation throughout the meeting, and the discussion provided useful insight into how the group thinks about generating private philanthropy.

Early in the meeting, Andy mentioned that she had compiled a list of people who should receive complimentary tickets to the dinner. The strategy was to invite prospective donors or useful contacts to attend free of charge, bringing them further into the fold of Network supporters. Her list targeted “different groups of Black folks we want to reach out to. Folks who move in higher net-worth groups. Black folks who want to be philanthropists.” The group spent time adding people to the list, as well. There was the Black executive at a local bank who had been sending The Network donations since meeting Fletcher at the nail salon. Some were contacts that had been made through current donors but not yet solidified. By giving out complimentary tickets, the development committee hoped to cultivate a new group of donors, specifically a new group of Black donors.

Complementing this strategy, Fletcher’s email promo would encourage people already in The Network’s sphere of influence to buy tickets. Andy emphasized that it should focus on the necessity of funding The Network’s work for Black artists and Black communities with dollars from Black donors, and she wanted to make sure the message got through. She told Fletcher that the email should be an appeal to “supporting Black artists and Black businesses,” that it should

“capitalize on the idea of Black philanthropists supporting our work.” To drive the message home, she added “say, ‘we can’t wait on White folks to give us money.’”

The emphasis on tapping Black donors to support The Network’s projects was a consistent point of discussion throughout the study period. Later observations suggested that the group’s Board of Directors was concerned about revenue and may have been pressuring Andy and the group to loosen their insistence on funding primarily from Black donors. In one meeting, Andy said she’d been working to convince the Board of “how badly we want to build funding off of Black dollars.” The Board did not seem to be the only group expressing concern, however. In our interview, Fletcher suggested that the group’s insistence on Black-majority funding limited its potential support. She cited her bi-racial heritage as informing her belief that “money is money,” and money is what The Network desperately needs to secure its survival and pursue its goals.

For others, though, the purpose of Black-majority funding is clear. For Andy, Justin, and Stephanie – the longest-standing members of the group – the purpose is liberation. Just as Justin said that ownership would solve the problem of precarity in The Space, Stephanie told me that the potential costs of relying on a White-led arts funding structure (what she called “certain dollars”) are too great: “What if [the money] runs out? What if they don’t want to do that anymore? They don’t have to. So it’s just wanting the liberty to not rely on someone – because you’re still dependent if that’s the case.” For a group whose mission is to advocate for Black artists and whose rhetoric regularly includes discussions about how the current arts structures lead to systemic marginalization of Black creatives and organizations, continuing to be beholden to the same White funders is antithetical to their mission.

It is important to note that Andy, Justin, Stephanie, and the other Network staff who agree with their view do not necessarily advocate alienating the majority-White powers-that-be in The City's arts funding structure. They simply choose to focus their fundraising efforts elsewhere as much as possible. Illustrating this point, I observed a conversation in which Network staff members discussed a former member who had castigated a prominent funding organization for its "racist" practices. Andy said that event had caused The Network problems ever since. Acknowledging the nuance in their position vis-à-vis White funders, Network leadership is highly critical of majority-White funding organizations, seeing them as unconcerned or out of touch with the challenges and deep inequity facing Black artists and Black communities

I observed a striking example of the disjunction between The Network's goals and those of a dominant local funding organization in a July meeting. The development committee was discussing a grant application Andy had prepared for submission to the local united arts fund. Their proposal was for a storytelling project aimed at engaging Black people in The City between the ages of 17 and 30. The proposal said the project would,

Empower Black creatives to shape their own narratives... We must reimagine our narratives as Black people (our story does not start with slavery, and it is not limited to the media's portrayal of our existence.) [The Network has] carved out a unique, much needed, space for Black folks to show up unapologetically and create. We are getting a glimpse at seeing what that means for a predominantly Black city that has built its legacy on the art and culture of Black folks. (Network Grant Application)

This grant, funded by a major national corporation based in The City, required Andy to articulate how the goals of The Network's project aligned with the funder's own strategic goals. The funder's goals reminded me of Florida's (2002) creative cities thesis, emphasizing livability, "public safety," and "community development." They are goals that serve the interests of a large

corporation looking to attract talented individuals to its home city, but they are not aligned with The Network's focus on advocating for Black artists and Black communities. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Andy needed to massage the project a bit to fit within the funder-determined parameters. When she addressed the final funder goal, diversity, Andy could only compromise so much. Her answer to how The Network's project addressed diversity said, "Our commitment is to equity. Our mission commits us to pushing for equitable opportunities for the [Black] majority of this city."

As Andy explained the grant proposal to us, she gave a brief version of what she planned to say to the granting committee, and in addressing why she focused on equity instead of diversity, she practiced a Cliff's Notes version of the entire history of Black oppression in The City. Not long into this explanation, she stopped herself, saying she wanted to explain to The Network development team why she was going "so heavy on the pain" in this application. She reminded the team that last year, while she had been in front of the funder grant review board defending their project plans, a member of the board asked, "Why can't White artists be involved?" Andy felt that, if The Network was going to get the grant this year, she needed to be explicit about why they focus on equity instead of diversity.

In listening to Andy explain this, I recalled an earlier meeting in which we'd discussed her thoughts on recent coverage The Network had received in Black-focused magazines and blogs. Did she feel like the group had been passed over for similar coverage in White-led outlets? Andy said she had felt relieved, actually. Generally, when she talks to White reporters – even educated, well-meaning ones – she has to explain things about how The Network sees and experiences the world. She doesn't need to explain those things to Black reporters, especially local ones. They can start from a shared understanding.

As the only White person sitting in the development meeting that July day, I was mortified that a funding organization representative had verbalized the question, “Why can’t White artists be involved?” How could a funder who purported to address inequality in The City allow someone who would ask that question to have control over the grants that are so pivotal to organizational survival? Then I remembered my conversation with Andy about the reporters and realized that I shouldn’t have been shocked. I was mortified by my shock. It came from a deep ignorance of how much explanation is required to publicly organize while Black. I am not so different from those White reporters.

This was one of many times that I became aware of how the preconceptions and ideas borne of my Whiteness and history in White arts organizations limited my understanding of The Network. A prime example concerns The Network’s fundraising strategy at gallery shows and concerts. In my previous work in a White arts organization, I was taught to ask for money frequently, to offer easy ways for patrons to give, and to encourage event attendees to financially support organizational programming. At Network events, though, the only donation ask I ever saw was at the bar, and it was generally an unmarked tip jar. There were no moments in which Andy or Stephanie got up in front of the crowd to ask for their financial support; there was no signage pointing people to the website to give; there were no donation envelopes or clearly marked credit card machines to take donations in person. No development staff worked to room to identify potential donors. Generally, the only collateral available was a price list for those who might be interested in purchasing a piece of the art on display. I was dumbfounded. This seemed like a huge missed opportunity!

I asked Stephanie, Fletcher, and Mattie (the members of the development team) about this in interviews. Fletcher could not recall specific team discussions about fundraising at gallery

shows and events. She guessed that it was simply something they overlooked in the often-frenzied preparation for events. Mattie and Stephanie cast it as a strategic decision, though. For both, The Network's mission is to elevate the visibility of Black artists and engage Black communities in the art they create. Though their work is not limited to Pine Hill, they argued, it is their immediate neighborhood and the area from which they most want to draw audiences. Pine Hill's financial characteristics suggest that audiences coming from the neighborhood may not have any money to give, and that asking for money or in any way telegraphing that they should pay to enter The Space undermined The Network's mission to engage them. Stephanie expressed it this way:

We know who we're having at The Space. We know our demographic. They just don't have it sometimes to give. That doesn't mean that they should go without experiencing nice things or events or cultural outings or experiences, plays, things like that -- whatever programming we're putting on. We understand where they are financially, and so we don't ask. We don't. (Stephanie)

In Stephanie's telling, asking for donations risks alienating the very audiences The Network is trying to attract. In alienating those audiences, they would limit the visibility of Black artists and fail to engage Black communities. Thus, while fundraising at events might be a quick way to raise some money, the risk to The Network's mission outweighs the potential reward.

Per its mission to shift the culture of The City in ways that benefit Black artists and communities, The Network is focused on generating money from Black donors and philanthropists and on remaining committed to its ideals, even when they don't align perfectly with funder priorities. They deemphasize fundraising at gallery shows, concerts, and community events, seeking to make The Space an arts hub in which all Black residents of The City – regardless of income – can feel comfortable and welcome. While these strategies may seem to exacerbate the funding problems that new nonprofits face (Minkoff and Powell 2006. Markusen

and Gadwa 2010), The Network views them as unavoidable challenges. For, just as their mission commitments may limit their funding opportunities and highlight existential problems, the arts system, in its consistent Whiteness, is itself an existential problem for The Network. The only way out is through self-sufficiency through independent revenue generation – developing touring programs, plans for property ownership, sales of products from local makers and artists, or avenues yet unexplored. Though this self-sufficiency seems a long way off, it is as significant a part of The Network’s mission as elevating Black artists, engaging Black communities, and shifting the culture of The City. The group knows that it cannot accomplish its mission if it accepts the White-dominated, dependency-based status quo that has crippled organizations before them.

***Staffing for Stability: “People assume I’m getting paid – that we’re all getting paid.” (Johnny)***

Near the end of July 2019, I attended a development meeting at The Space. This meeting was set to be different from the others I’d observed, as it focused specifically on the expanding Corner Store (The Network’s makers market and alternative revenue project housed in The Space). The Corner Store was considered by team members to be an important first step in moving toward organizational self-sufficiency, and they frequently discussed ways to enhance its profitability. It also provided a semi-permanent space in which local creatives and makers could sell their wares, serving The Network’s mission to elevate Black artists. This meeting was meant to get the new Corner Store (Stephanie and including Lauren and Kat) off the ground, fleshing out responsibilities and planning workflows. To that end, Lauren and Kat joined the development meeting that evening.

It had been a rainy day, and the high-summer humidity fogged up the front windows of The Space. I entered to find a dozen or so members of The Network staff finishing up a meeting (Stephanie met me at the door and said it would be finished in a few minutes.) Since I had not been approved to observe that meeting, I headed to the back to sit and work on my laptop while they wrapped up. After a bit, Andy came to the back to heat up some dinner before beginning the development meeting. She said they'd had several back-to-back meetings before I arrived, and everyone was tired. To help everyone make it through the development meeting (their last of the day), they were going to order dinner from the wing place across the parking lot. Andy was vegetarian, though, so she'd make do with Indian food leftovers. We briefly talked about the joys of Indian food as a vegetarian option.

I got settled in the meeting room as the rest of the attendees finalized their food order. Fletcher and Stephanie were there, as were Lauren and Kat. Danny was also there, waiting for a ride home from Kat. After the food was ordered, Andy began the meeting, moving quickly through a relatively long meeting agenda, which included small check-in items and updates on larger projects and funding requests. Before long, Andy was talking about the upcoming Back-to-School Pop-Up, which would be centered on an expanded version of the Corner Store. They needed to secure event sponsors and solidify the vendor list. Stephanie updated her on some details, and Fletcher joined to talk about how they could take the next steps.

About twenty minutes after they ordered, the wings were ready, and Fletcher and Danny went to pick them up. While they were gone, Andy kept moving through the agenda. She was now focused on the Corner Store, trying to get a sense from Stephanie about what Kat and Lauren's exact responsibilities would be. Stephanie made some suggestions based on previous conversations with Lauren and Kat, but the latter two seemed a bit distant from the conversation,

rarely speaking up even when asked. Perhaps to acknowledge this, Andy said, “I’m tired, too. We shouldn’t do meetings back-to-back...” At about the same time, Fletcher and Danny returned with the wings, and the meeting paused for some eating and casual conversation. Unfortunately, there was something wrong with Kat’s order, and she said she’d just eat at home.

As dinner wrapped up, Andy moved back to the Corner Store conversation, which progressed for a bit before Kat and Danny stood up to leave. Andy said they were almost done and asked if they could stay since the purpose of the meeting was in part to sort out Kat’s role. Kat insisted that she needed to get to the grocery store before heading home. Andy emphasized that she had purchased dinner for the group for just this reason – so they could all stay and finish the discussions to be had. She took up the meeting agenda again, and Danny and Kat remained standing but did not move to the door. A few minutes later, Lauren also got up to leave. Again, Andy stopped the meeting to ask why she could not stay. Lauren talked about having been sick lately and ultimately said she just needed to go. At this point, Andy was clearly aggravated but maintained her composure, reiterating that she bought dinner specifically so everyone could stay and emphasizing that there was more important work to be done that evening. The situation became palpably tense, though, when Lauren – responding to Andy’s assertion that they had more work to do - said, “It’s not that serious.” Almost in unison, Stephanie, Fletcher, and Andy leaned back in their seats incredulously.

After that, Lauren, Kat, and Danny left quickly, leaving Stephanie, Fletcher, Andy, and I in the room. Though they quickly resumed the meeting’s business, Stephanie, Andy, and Fletcher were bothered by Lauren and Kat’s early departure. This meeting was about the work they would be doing as members of a newly organized team. More than that, though, they were bothered by Lauren’s statement that The Network’s work on that evening was “not that serious.”

Andy summed up the sentiment by saying, “It is serious. You’ve got people trying to quit their jobs to do this.”

I share this observation not to air The Network’s interpersonal dirty laundry, but to showcase the immense pressure facing members of the group. At the beginning of my project, all Network staff members were volunteers. None were paid. In the prior year, they had maintained a performance and event schedule to rival any large organization, hosting concerts, artist workshops, gallery performances, and community events, and they had opened The Space, a feat in itself. All the work required for this success was done in the evenings and weekends by young people with fulltime jobs, caregiving responsibilities for children or parents, and creative careers they hoped to nurture. They told me that the pace was exhausting. Many of them were rightly exhausted (like Andy), struggling to take care of their own health (like Lauren), and pressed for time (like Kat.) The burden of balancing so many responsibilities always threatened to – and often did – force The Network to rework plans, quickly adjust to the loss of a key staff member, or even cancel or reschedule events.

In our first meeting, Andy told me that staff burnout was a significant problem for The Network, a perfect storm of ambitious goals and a thinly spread team.

You’re going to work first, right? Your nine to five. And then you're coming from work to commit whatever energy you have left to this very personal, passionate project. Then the next day you wake up and you're still Black and you're still affected by a lot of the issues that you're fighting against. You're still living under the poverty line. You're still dealing with different things. And that can be really, really taxing and exhausting, and if we're not careful what we've seen happen recently is people burn out and they burn out quickly, especially as we're pumping these events out in the way we are. (Andy)

In the July development meeting, Andy was (rightly) bothered that people did not stay until the end, even after she provided food to facilitate a longer evening; however, she told me early and

often that she understands why people cannot always give their maximum energy to the group – they literally cannot afford to.

Johnny, The Network artist in residence with an infectious laugh, explained to me that staff instability required the group to adopt gentle, but effective practices to encourage accountability. If you are getting paid to do a job, Johnny said, you have a reason to show up day after day. If you are volunteering, its easy – and understandable – to let things slip.

It is very much just a team effort, which is great because everybody's consist-- everybody that stayed -- is consistent. And we put things in place to where if somebody is not being consistent or they're just not pitching in or something that there are repercussions, and we set the repercussions for each other. It's not, like, a punishing thing. It's just like a, "Hey, what's up?" thing. "Are you are you OK? Do you want to be doing this?" [Because] that's going to hurt the work that needs to be done, the work that you say is going to be done but gets left to the side. (Johnny)

As Johnny alludes to in this quote and Andy mentioned previously, several staff members have come and gone, finding that work with The Network did not fit with their other priorities. In Johnny's mind, most of the people now working at The Network are pretty consistent. That said, the group has needed to set guidelines for how to keep each other accountable. Johnny told me about a recent staff retreat in which they had decided as a group and as teams how many meetings people should be allowed to miss, how many times they should be allowed to "flake" on a task, etc. While Johnny was careful to differentiate between "repercussions" and "punishment," my observations and interviews did suggest that previous staff members have been asked to leave the organization. This is usually discussed as a necessary parting of ways – necessary to honor the priorities or philosophical differences of the staff member in question and necessary to ensure that The Network maintains its forward momentum.

Staff stability is critical for The Network as it undertakes the increasingly ambitious set of plans necessary to grow and meet its mission. For all the staff members I spoke to, staff salaries are the solution to the stability problem. It was the most common answer to a question that asked participants to identify the biggest challenge facing The Network – a more common answer even than funding. The interviewees emphasized that The Network has been remarkably successful with an all-volunteer staff, but to move to the next level, to meet their mission, to be more stable, they needed fulltime paid positions. Stephanie summed up the general sentiment this way:

I think [The Network is] still a little rickety, only because we cannot fully be immersed in it – because life still exists, and this is still volunteer-based. But as soon as people are salaried or full-time or part-time, just watch out. I feel like we're going to set stuff on fire. We'll be able to fully immerse. We've been trying to find a way to pull energy, pull time from the next day to crank this stuff out and make it happen. And it's working and it's been stellar every time. That's the wild part about it. That is my only complaint – that we can't get enough funding so that people can be compensated with a livable wage. Because that's an important thing, too. (Stephanie)

Stephanie's "that's an important thing, too" points to a pivotal characteristic of The Network's staff: they are all artists themselves. Johnny told me that Network staff is committed to the work because it benefits them directly, increasing the visibility (and the prosperity) of Black artists like them. Justin emphasized that staff members are invested in the work because it speaks to their own experiences as artists and has a direct impact on their opportunities. To advocate for Black artists, then, The Network must first advocate for rightful compensation for its staff.

When I met Andy in February 2020, roughly a year after our first conversation, she had great news. Each of The Network's four departmental teams was now headed by a paid team lead. She qualified her excitement on this point by saying she'd feel better once they were paid enough to get health insurance, but she repeatedly called this change a "step in the right

direction.” It allowed team leads to dedicate four hours three days each week solely to their work with The Network, and – as a result – each of the team leads no longer needed a day job. They were all focusing on their art-making and organizational work. Sadly, several of the staff members who communicated a deep desire to work solely for The Network were not yet in paid positions; however, having a limited number of staff members in paid positions freed up Andy’s time enough to allow her to focus more on the fundraising skills and plans that she hoped would lead to more paid hours for more paid people. For now, the money to pay staff comes from relatively small line items in grant requests and the leftover funds from other projects. Though compensation has increased stability in the team lead positions, the funding for that compensation is itself precarious; however, as Andy said, it is a step in the work of elevating Black artists, including themselves.

***Preventing Displacement: “Ownership flips that whole thing on its head.” (Andy)***

My observation notes are full of conversations and meetings in which The Network discussed big plans – plans to open a coffee shop/Corner Store hybrid near their current location, plans to purchase a half-dozen homes in Pine Hill to house artists at low cost and earn Airbnb rental revenue, and plans to purchase an enormous property featuring a highly visible local landmark and seven acres of land across the street from The Space. (Incidentally, the current owner of the latter property is advertising it for sale as an ideal big-batch brewery location of the kind that led gentrification processes elsewhere in The City.) Just as The Network’s Black-focused fundraising strategies, plans for self-sufficiency, and emphasis on compensating staff serve both their organizational needs and mission-driven goals, their frequent talk about ownership centers their organizational and mission-driven concerns about displacement.

Justin, The Network's program director, talked about property ownership as a means through which The Network could ensure its survival. As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Justin and the entire team were disturbed at the sale of The Space's plaza. Though they were not displaced in the process, that event drove home the idea that the group's work "can be negated" (Justin) by circumstances outside their control. In Justin's view, The Network must make its own decisions about when and where to have their headquarters and presenting space, and ownership is the only sure way to secure that independence and stability.

If all of the work that we're doing in The Space or in the community can be negated by somebody just deciding that they don't want to renew a lease, it's scary. So ownership is very important. Very important to the sustainability of the work we are trying to do.  
(Justin)

As always with Justin, his interview responses combined both attention to The Network's current situation and contextualization of that situation within the history of Black people in The City. He emphasizes that Black poverty is due in large part to a lack of generational wealth passed down through property and that young Black people must prioritize ownership to address economic inequity. He applies the same logic to organizations, where current leadership should invest in ownership for the benefit of the organization's future. So, for Justin, ownership is a question of stability for both the organization and for Black people more generally.

Andy echoes these sentiments. She recalls a history in which Black people are only recently able to own property without the burdens of overt legal prohibition or institutionalized redlining, and she engages with questions about what it means to "catch up" to White people in terms of property ownership and wealth. In addition to her focus on working toward a more equitable future, she is focused on the organizational benefits of access to property, arguing that

improves The Network's power to negotiate its place in the art system by freeing them from reliance on other organizations and gatekeepers.

For a long time, we were offered less than we were worth in these predominately White and legacy institutions and the carrot stick dangled above our head was, "oh, you'll have access to space." So instead of compensating us fairly, they would just offer us space, knowing that we needed it. And we would kind of knowingly be manipulated so that we could do the programs and have conversations we thought were important. And so I think having space has completely shifted that paradigm. We don't have to play by anybody else's rules. We can have exactly what conversations we want to have. And they're not dictated by the White gaze. (Andy)

While The Space offers a degree of freedom, though, The Network's access to it is not guaranteed. The real solution is property ownership, "our next big step," as Andy says.

While Andy emphasizes ownership as a route to organizational stability, she is also aware that, in owning property, The Network would have much greater power to "blockade gentrification and displacement" in Pine Hill. She suggests they might even have a responsibility to do so, as their work attracts more attention to the area.

If you own the property, you then become the decision-maker on the direction of a neighborhood or block or whatever. And so there is no table without you. That is essentially creating your own table. So how do we blockade gentrification, displacement as we're doing like really fun, interesting work that could attract those people who would actively do that? (Andy)

For Andy and other members of The Network, their mission to shift the culture of The City in ways that benefit Black neighborhoods necessarily includes consideration of how they can work to prevent the gentrification that threatens them. Thus, while ownership serves the group's organizational stability, it also serves its mission, centering a focus on the Black communities it hopes engage.

The group has scaled back some its ownership plans, but the big one – the big landmark property – is still potentially in play. It is a stunning example of what is at stake. From an organizational perspective, owning the property just across the street would secure The Network a level of autonomy and stability while keeping them in Pine Hill, a place that means so much to them. From the perspective of their mission, their purchase of the property would block the very investors the current owners are courting – the new, hip brewery set – from taking a prominent spot in Pine Hill. For The Network to engage Black communities, those communities must continue to exist, and gentrification and displacement are direct threats to community survival. By purchasing property, The Network secures itself and its neighborhood.

### *A Mission to Exist*

Minkoff and Powell (2006) argue that an excessive focus on organizational strategy or increased professionalization in nonprofits can cause a deviation from mission. Their logic separates the organization itself from the work that motivates staff, volunteers, and donors to join. Based on an analysis of the group’s fundraising strategies, efforts to pay the staff, and focus on ownership, it is clear that such a separation between organizational health and mission does not map onto The Network’s experience. Indeed, though their struggles mirror those that face many young nonprofit organizations (Markusen and Gadwa 2010), The Network’s problem-solving strategies are uniquely their own, grounded in their mission and guiding philosophy.

When I met with Andy in February 2020, The Network had recently won a competitive grant from a high-profile national funder. I asked her how, in light of this success, she was thinking about the challenges facing The Network, if this grant signaled a turn of the tide. Andy

attributed the recent attention to their work to the election of Donald Trump as president. The whole world is now tripping over itself to be the Anti-Trump, she said. Funders were trying to be the *most* anti-racist, the *most* anti-homophobic, the *most* anti-sexist. Though she feels that funders often just want to say, “look at all these Browns and Blacks we fund” (Andy), she sees this moment as an opportunity – one that won’t last forever.

I give it three years, maybe five, and then people will be back to their post-racial bullshit. So we have to push as hard and as fast as we can in the meantime. Because we’ll get pushed back after this is over. But at least we won’t get pushed all the way back. (Andy)

For The Network, pushing as hard as possible means insisting on funding their work with “Black dollars,” securing salaries for the staff, and owning property. If they are successful, they will have created a significant shift in the culture of The City’s arts system, elevating Black artists, and engaging Black communities. In short, if they secure their organizational needs, they will serve their mission.

### 4.3 THE NETWORK'S PHILOSOPHY OF ART

I hung my arm out the car window as I idled in traffic en route to The Space one Friday evening. The weather was warm, but not yet humid, with the kind of late spring breeze that is precious to Southern people facing another long, stifling summer. Perhaps because of this, the traffic had been a nightmare, clogged with people heading into The City for a night out. I was on my way to the first official event observation of this study, a concert featuring a local hip-hop artist on the UpFront label, and I had no idea what to expect. This event, "A Very Red Show," was part of The Network's regular concert series and featured the Stranger, an UpFront Records artist whose promotional biography said he was "known for his uncomfortable, undeniable honesty, energetic live show and often disturbing stories of a strange childhood. The Stranger explores dark ideas and depressing self-images in order to get past them (UpFront Records). While I hadn't listened to any of the Stranger's music, I had seen him before, and he is memorable. He's a slim man in his mid-twenties, who wears pink bunny ears (according to his bio, an "ode to 'Bunny Boy' from avant-garde director Harmony Korine's *Gummo*) and four gold teeth that spell the word "shit." According to The Network's promotional materials, this concert would allow the Stranger to curate an evening completely from his own "strange imagination."

I pulled into the parking lot around 8:12 for the 8:30 show, hoping to be one of the early arrivals and watch the end of the set-up process. Since the traffic cut into my pre-show observation time, I rushed to the door, only to find it locked. As I headed back to my car to wait,

I looked around outside The Space. The parking lot was busy as people went in and out of the nearby beauty supply store and the wing shop, and groups of people stood talking and laughing along the covered plaza walkway. It was a vibrant scene that felt thoroughly Friday night – groups of young people dressed up for a night out crossed paths with women and children walking into the wing shop, while old men stood chatting outside of the beauty supply store. In the midst of this relaxed atmosphere, though, I noticed something that unnerved me. There were police cars everywhere. At least two were parked on my side of the parking lot, and three more drove through in the ten minutes I waited in my car. I felt surveilled in a way I hadn't before. I would think about that evening over the course of the next several months, of how aware I was of a level of police presence that I have never experienced, especially as Network members told me that The Space and Pine Hill are places where they feel relatively free from White eyes. If this is relative freedom from surveillance, what must they experience elsewhere?

At 8:27, I got out of my car and joined the small line of people gathering in front of The Space. The large front windows, which usually flood the front gallery with sunlight during the day and streetlight at night, were completely covered in red paper such and I could not see inside. At 8:30, a woman (who I would later know as Fletcher, a member of The Network's development team) opened the door and let us in. It was dark inside The Space – the ceiling lights had been replaced with red bulbs, giving the room an eerie glow. Event attendees enter The Space by walking up a short ramp, and the railings on either side corralled the small crowd past a ticket-taker, who checked proof of ticket purchase on audience members' phones. I needed to buy my ticket with cash at the door, so I was rummaging through my purse when my turn at the table came. I looked up to see a strongly built twenty-something man sporting a red flat-billed ball cap and a dark t-shirt. His shirt design was a picture of Tina Belcher, the nerdy,

awkward teenage girl character from the Fox animated series *Bob's Burgers*, with the words, “strong, smart, sensual” underneath her. “Oh my God, I love your shirt!” I blurted out, shocked to see that shirt on the very masculine-presenting person taking tickets for a show that promised to let audience members into the Stranger’s “disturbing” world. He chuckled good-naturedly as he took my cash and waved me in.

As I walked into the front gallery, I noticed a few Network staff members behind the refreshments table to my right and to my left, a large Black canopy that completely blocked the wall hanging announcing The Network’s latest gallery show. The canopy was a merchandise booth, offering stickers, sweatshirts and other UpFront Records promotional items stacked around a screen playing a looping video of things on fire. The audio from that video was piped into the room, complementing the eerie red light with the sound of a crackling fire. At this point, there were about forty people in The Space, milling around in small groups or waiting alone for the show to start, and I noticed that several people were paying attention to something happening on the left wall. It was the Stranger, sporting his trademark bunny ears and a red jumpsuit, writing something on a large piece of paper tacked to the wall. I squeezed through gaps in the crowd until I was close enough to see that he was writing (my eyes aren’t great.) It was “fuck everybody,” in a variety of large and small scripts. He didn’t pay any obvious attention to the people gathering in The Space, and we didn’t get any closer than we already were – the girl standing next to him was holding a large ax. He kept writing until the show started at 9:15, and the girl stood guard the whole time.

After a few minutes, I moved back toward the other side of the room and made friends with a young woman, Rina, who was waiting for her friend to arrive. Rina told me that her boyfriend was a new UpFront artist just starting out with the label and that he’d convinced her to

come to the show. Now she was waiting alone while he helped set up. She asked me if I'd ever been to an "UpFront event" before. I said I had not and took the opportunity to ask if she'd ever been to any Network events. (Since the most obvious identifier of this as The Network's Space was blocked by the merch tent, I was interested to find out if people knew this was The Network's headquarters.) She had never heard of The Network. Before I could find out more, a large video appeared on the wall behind Rina and me, and we – along with the rest of the audience (now about 150 people) – shuffled to get out of the way.

The video projection showed a calm mountain scene over which the Stranger repeated the words "fuck everybody." The video blended seamlessly into the first song, and the crowd turned as one to see the Stranger performing shirtless in an improvised stage area. The stage occupied the back third of the front gallery, blocking the entrance to the back gallery. There was a seven-foot ladder set stage right (in front of the soundboards and production equipment) and another ladder set slightly back on the stage left side. In the center was a roughly four-foot by six-foot raised platform made of two large plywood sheets sandwiched between cinder blocks. The ax-wielding girl had taken up a place at the back of the stage near two men dressed in red monk robes who stood guard at the doors to the back gallery. (One of the monks was Rina's boyfriend.) These three stood motionless during the performance, contrasting with what seemed like constant motion at the front of the stage. The Stranger is an extremely energetic performer (as his bio promised), and he bounded around the stage, gesturing forcefully, moving up and down the ladders, and leaping onto and off of the raised stage area. For the first song, I was so awed that I forgot to take notes.

At the end of the first song, the Stranger greeted the audience, shouting out to the local crowd. The show was saturated with local references – "real shit," as the Stranger called it – and

the crowd ate it up. One song, with a chorus of, “Sup mane, you fresh ain’t it?” (what the Stranger termed “a real City greeting”) deftly blended high energy hype lines with social commentary and intimate personal reflections. In later songs, the Stranger was joined by other members of UpFront’s roster of performers, and each was greeted with enthusiastic cheers from the crowd. At one point, I looked to my right and saw Andy, The Network’s executive director, dancing and singing along. The crowd’s energy built throughout the show and reached a peak on the last song, whose chorus of “Fuck my job. I hate going there,” clearly resonated with the working-age audience members, who pumped their fists and sang loudly along. After the last number, the Stranger again thanked the crowd for coming and also for being willing to pay a ticket fee to attend. He said that people usually complain about tickets. Nobody here did, though, and he appreciated that. (David, UpFront’s CEO and one of The Network members I spoke with for this project, would later tell me that UpFront made more money on ticket sales for this one show at The Space than they had ever made being hosted in White-owned venues. It was proof that they didn’t need those White gatekeepers to be successful.) Before leaving the stage, the Stranger also thanked The Network for hosting the event, and The Network members at the refreshments table clapped and waved. Interestingly, this was the only mention of The Network I’d heard all evening.

After the show, audience members flooded into the stage area, mingling with the musicians and chatting in groups. I had learned early in the evening that an 8:30 start meant 8:30 doors, and now I learned that audience space and artist space were not as rigid here as in my experience. I was trained as a classical musician in places where the stage is sacrosanct, a space for performers only. Here, audience members and performers sat and talked on the ladders, people checked out the soundboard, and one woman even began singing at the microphone.

Though people were clearly annoyed by her (the half-turn is an unmistakable sign), no one made her stop. She continued until her friends convinced her it was time to leave. Not long after she left, a musician opened the doors into the back gallery, which had apparently been functioning as a backstage space, and the remaining audience members followed the musicians back there. Not wanting to intrude on the backstage space, I quickly introduced myself to the Stranger, who seemed understandably exhausted. We spoke briefly, and I asked if he would be willing to talk for my project at some later time. He agreed and told me to reach out to him on social media. (Unfortunately, we were never able to connect.) As I turned to head out, I saw Andy speaking intently to a couple of Network staff in the center of the now largely empty gallery. I waived as I headed past, knowing I'd see her two days later for a development meeting, and then I started the drive home.

As a former performer and arts administrator, I was interested in learning how The Network's members think about the purpose or nature of art. What is its role? What should it be? Who gets to decide? The Stranger's concert gave me a ton of information, but two things stood out above the others: the focus on artistic freedom and the permeability of the artist-audience boundary. The Network, as presenter of the concert series, allowed the Stranger and UpFront Records maximum artistic freedom. They were allowed to completely change the look and feel of The Space to present an event that represented the Stranger's unique artistic sensibilities. This was true to such an extent that the concert's setup obstructed the markers of The Network's own identity in The Space.

Additionally, any barriers between audience and artist were temporary and easily crossed. While the stage area was reserved for the Stranger before and during the show, it became the audience's space immediately afterward – a space for people to connect with the

Stranger and the other artists. It even became a place for one audience member to enjoy her own performer moment in front of the microphone. Likewise, the Stranger occupied audience space in his pre-show writing performance and in the video projection. There was no sense that *this* space belonged to the artists and *that* to the audience. Rather, artists and audience members inhabited the same space, moving freely back and forth across a highly permeable barrier. In both ways, The Network's approach to art was different from the one I'd learned.

### ***Dominant Art Ideologies***

There is widespread agreement that the nonprofit arts are facing a moment of crisis, pressed by changing funding structures, declining engagement, and increased creative pluralism (Alexander and Bowler 2014; Ivey 2008; McDonnell and Tepper 2014). Baumann (2007) finds that, within this context of heightened competition for scarce resources, art makers, critics, and audiences vie for legitimacy by employing framing and discourse processes that appeal to dominant arts ideologies. McDonnell and Tepper (2014) identify two broad strands of legitimating ideology in the contemporary field of nonprofit cultural production: ideologies of excellence and fragility and ideologies of community benefit.

McDonnell and Tepper (2014) find that high culture nonprofits (what they call HCNPs) rely on metaphors of wealth and excellence to make the case that their organizations are worth saving in an increasingly democratic artistic environment. These metaphors refer to HCNPs, such as symphony orchestras, art museums, and ballet companies, as “jewels,” “treasures,” or “pinnacles of culture” that inspire artistic excellence (McDonnell and Tepper 2014:28).

According to this ideology, the cultural treasures of HCNPs are vulnerable to ongoing culture

wars that undercut their privileged positions and threaten their funding security, and HCNP supporters argue that it is in the best interest of cities to protect these organizations as markers of local cultural capital. Though the authors do not explore the Eurocentric origins of these metaphors, they note that “images of gifts, ambassadors, and oases suggest that HCNPs stand apart from everyday life, privileging ceremony and distinction over engagement and connection” (McDonnell and Tepper 2014:28).

In contrast, popular culture nonprofits (PCNPs) rely on ideologies of community relevance and benefit but see less discursive convergence than HCNPs. The discourse around PCNPs emphasizes democratic values, broadly defined community good, and PCNPs as centers of community life, but still relies on ideological distinction from commercial enterprises (McDonnell and Tepper 2014). The loss of these institutions is a loss not of some cultural treasure, but of shared community life (McDonnell and Tepper 2014). This discourse has much in common with the ideology underlying *Creative Placemaking* (Markusen and Gadwa 2010), which encourages cultural organizations across the high culture-popular culture spectrum to build cross-sectoral partnerships toward some public good. Organizations that are relevant to public needs and desires, the logic goes, may help address community issues while making a clear case for their own value in an increasingly competitive arts and culture field.

McDonnell and Tepper (2014) end their study by asking what a third or alternative ideology might look like.

What if we saw our cultural institutions as robust and egalitarian? What if we viewed the death and birth of organizations as part of a natural and dynamic process? What if we valued and considered community voices as much as we do the opinions of cultural elites? (McDonnell and Tepper 2014)

I argue that The Network finds itself in the position of developing just such an alternative ideology of the arts. This is due to both exogenous and endogenous factors. First, The Network and its artists are racially excluded from participation in the cultural treasures ideology that supports White-led nonprofit organizations and White, Eurocentric art. Second, as argued in previous chapters, The Network's community focus is fundamentally different from the discourses of community benefit that underlie PCNP ideologies, especially those in the creative placemaking strain, since it rejects discourses that center community deficits. Furthermore, The Network's philosophy of artistic value, while encouraging audience participation, is also highly individualistic, precluding access to ideologies of community-orientation that typify the PCNP case for existence (McDonnell and Tepper 2014). Instead of casting their work as a precious cultural jewel in need of protection or as a tool for community problem-solving, The Network cultivates a living art, one that requires an environment conducive to growth and is ultimately oriented toward individual creative expression. To occupy this third space, however, requires the strength to engage in contestation and to resist the pressure to conform.

***Resisting the Pressure to Conform: "We're carving out a place." (Andy)***

I sat across from Andy, The Network's Executive Director, at their conference room table one afternoon toward the end of my research period. As we sipped green tea, I asked what had inspired her to found The Network five years ago. "That's the story of a lifetime," she explained, but it had certainly started with her grandmother. Andy's grandmother made it a point to educate her grandchildren in African American history from an early age. "So, I hear people talking about when they first realized they were Black or different," Andy said, "but someone went out of their way to tell me before I found out." As an example, Andy recalled visiting a civil rights

museum with her grandmother when she was a kindergartener. They entered the museum through an exhibit designed to replicate the interior of a slave ship, and Andy never forgot that space. There were crates on the walls and wax figures reached out to six-year-old Andy as she walked by. She could hear them crying, hear people moaning, hear chains dragging along the floor, and she was terrified. She emphasized that the experience sticks with her even today. After a brief pause, she laughed, saying it made an impression on her six-year-old self, too. She returned to school the following week and yelled, “I know what you did to us!” at her teacher. “The lady’s actually Vietnamese,” she chuckled, “so there was an early understanding – or misunderstanding – of what it all meant.”

Regardless of what misunderstandings little Andy may have had, these early experiences inspired her to study African American history and begin work on community organizing in college. Her major was journalism, though, and her love of writing fed a general love of art. She is careful to specify what she means by “art,” though:

Those are the two things that kind of always stuck out for me – Black people and art – and “art” makes it sound more hoity-toity than I think I want it to. Literally storytelling. People expressing their experience in whatever way they're doing it. (Andy)

She combined her love of storytelling with her passion for African American history and community organization into an early career in community art galleries. After only a few years of work in existing community-focused galleries, however, Andy became convinced of the need for spaces that specifically attended to Black arts experiences, focusing less on diversity than on equity for both artists and audiences.

The job of creating a new, equity-focused art space that “flips traditional galleries on their head” (Andy) by prioritizing artistic freedom and encouraging audiences to connect with art

on their own terms has not been easy, though. There is tremendous pressure to conform to preexisting arts ideologies and organizational styles. For example, powerful funders and locally dominant organizations have encouraged The Network to “focus” on one artistic discipline. If they intend to showcase visual art, they should lean into their identity as a gallery. If they want to be a performing arts venue, they should establish themselves there. If they want to be an artist incubator, they should focus on those programs. “No,” Andy says. They intend to “carve out a space” where all forms of expression are valid, countering dominant models that silo art in separate places. Similarly, they reject the idea that an arts organization should exert any creative control over artists’ work. While they organize thematically coherent events, artists are invited to respond whenever and however they see fit. There is not a commission-style relationship of art worker to patron organization in The Space.

The Network works continually to remake the art-making and art-encountering experience in ways that center artists and audiences – to avoid the “hoity-toity” (Andy) conventions of arts organizations. Baumann (2007) finds that pressure to conform to dominant arts ideologies, discourses, and frames is typical in both the arts and social movements fields. If artistic and movement legitimacy is defined via powerful ideologies, actors that operate outside those legitimation systems threaten the entrenched status quo and are often de-legitimized. This pressure to conform does not operate only on the level of organizations, however. In the course of this study, individual artists reported a keen sense of conflict over the nature of their own artistic work. This was especially true of two Network artists, Johnny and Ilona.

Over coffee at a favorite local haunt, Johnny, a member of The Network’s community engagement team and an artist whose painting is full of vibrant colors and bold images, told me about the experience of attending the nearby art college. Though the school is located in a

majority-Black city, Johnny was one of only a few Black students and there were “even fewer Latinx or Asian kids.” In that space, Johnny explained, Black art or “any niche art like feminist art” was dismissed as trite or cliché. Johnny had no incentive or room in that predominantly White institution to explore their Blackness, what it meant to them, how or whether racial identity was important to their individual creativity. Instead, Johnny learned to de-emphasized race, gender, or sexuality, focusing on something outside of “niche art.”

After graduation, though, Johnny found that professional opportunities for Black artists were centered in the “niche art” that their formal education encouraged them to look down on. It was “the total opposite” (Johnny). Professional galleries wanted what Johnny called “trauma work,” art focused on the pain and suffering of the Black American experience. Johnny was not the only Network member to mention this gallery predilection. Justin, The Network’s program director, told me that curators and gallery owners often “frame work by Black artists in some kind of problematic way,” confining Black creativity to a narrow lane focused on the trauma of slavery and Jim Crow. Thus, Johnny, Justin, and others find themselves in a double bind of dominant paradigms, where art schools marginalize art that engages with Blackness in favor of a de-racialized artistic expression (one that does not threaten the Eurocentric status quo) while commercial galleries fetishize an extremely limited range of Black creative expression, reifying the “niche” classification of art that engages with race. Justin and Johnny are committed to throwing off the hierarchical ideologies of their training, working as Network staff members to create opportunities for Black artists to make art freely based on their own expressive needs and desires.

***Redefining Art: “You’re 25 and you’re dying. Do some meaningful work.” (Johnny)***

McDonnell and Tepper (2014) find that high culture nonprofits encourage a view of themselves as guardians of treasures that must be protected. This view includes a definition of art as a thing that transcends our everyday lives and should be preserved for posterity. Baumann (2007) points out that these treasures (legitimated art) are created as such by a process of critique that relies on dominant ideologies, discourses, and framing strategies that appeal to intellectualism and Eurocentric arts hierarchies. On the other hand, McDonnell and Tepper (2014) find that popular culture nonprofits argue that they exist for community benefit, and define art as a tool for community-facing work. This is particularly true of organizations involved in creative placemaking projects (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). In short, the nonprofit art world is dominated by two working definitions of art: 1) art is a transcendent treasure rendered as such by critical legitimation or 2) art is a tool that groups use to achieve some specific goal. For The Network, art is neither of these things. Rather, it is an individual creative expression that should not be critiqued, censored, or contextualized by anyone other than the artist and is available to connect with audience members according to their individual needs. Its meaning lies in its ability to contribute to individual health, hope, and happiness.

In the opening of this chapter, I told the story of my experience at the Stranger’s concert in The Space. As an audience member, I was struck by his energy as a performer and by his commitment to the artistic world he created that evening. But I was also disoriented. I am accustomed to performances that explain themselves. Why was he writing on the wall at the beginning? What was the significance of the mountain scene in the projected video? What was the girl with the ax about? And the monks? While I desperately wanted to know what the Stranger meant by all of this, I was also aware that he was not burdened by having to explain it

to me. His artistic vision was more important than my access to the intimate creative processes and meaning-makings that led to the performance. The ability to present one's work as it is, without the need for explanation or fully articulated rationales, allows artists to explore new ideas and take risks that they may not do in other spaces. It also allows them to explore complex issues as individuals without the burden of speaking for anyone but themselves.

Just over a month after the Stranger's show, I attended the opening of FIBER, an exhibition that was advertised as, "an exploration of freedom." In FIBER, a dozen woman-identifying Network artists reflected on the "the trials, triumphs and experiences of the Black woman's narrative as it pertains to the freedoms that we are afforded and the capacity in which we persevere and act upon it" (The Network's Facebook page). Though the description referenced "the Black woman's narrative," this event was far from a monolithic representation of what it is to be a Black woman. The images spoke to a wide range of lived experiences – women balancing professional life with family obligations, queer women claiming their identities, young women grappling with the role of the church in defining expectations for them women proudly embracing their sexuality, women working to heal from sexual violence. This range of experiences was expressed in painting, photographs, fiber art, collage, and next to each piece of art was a brief artist statement, each as different from the next as the works they followed. Some artists explained the specific work on display, others wrote about their general artistic philosophy, one wrote a poem. In this space, where all of the artists were woman-identifying and Black, no individual was forced to speak for everyone. Rather, each artist had room to explore their own narrative, and it was the coalescence of diverse, individual experiences that told the story of "the Black woman's experience."

The Network's emphasis on individuality is important to all of its artists, but perhaps especially to those that identify as LGBTQ. While it allows them space to explore their own narratives in exhibitions and performances, it also offers them crucial visibility. Johnny, a member of The Network's Community Engagement Team and former facilitator in its school-based program, helped me see the potential impact of this visibility. When Johnny first joined The Network, they facilitated art programs and workshops at Pine Hill High. In that capacity, they created space in which any kid could express and work to make sense of their own life and experiences. Johnny felt this was especially important for "our little queer babies," who needed to see role models like themselves. Similarly, Danny, The Network's program assistant, expressed hope that, in providing a space for diverse individual stories, The Network could help change what he perceives is an anti-LGBTQ bias in the Black community. If LGBTQ narratives are presented alongside and as equals to heterosexual narratives, community members young and old might shift their ideas of what constitutes Black masculinity or femininity.

The Network's focus on individual creativity not only creates space for diverse personal narratives, it also allows for varied responses to and levels of engagement with what Jade referred to as the "grand trauma" of slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration. Jade, the maverick young filmmaker and Network Community Engagement Team lead, describes herself as "a multidisciplinary artist whose work always speaks to the Black American experience without directly referencing the grand trauma of slavery or Jim Crow." Jade chooses to focus on the humanity of her subjects, prioritizing the whole personhood of Black people. "Sometimes," she said, "a story about two Black people falling in love is just a story about two Black people falling in love." She clarifies that this is not to say that she does not do "political work." Indeed, she recently gave a poetry-infused TED talk equating placemaking to missionary work and

conquerors; however, her political efforts are work of her choosing, just as her work about people falling in love should be. For artists like Jade, presenting work with The Network and in The Space, where she is not the token Black presenter, allows her to express herself according to her own convictions. There may be, and often are, Network artists whose work does engage with the histories of slavery and Jim Crow and with its modern incarnations of poverty and mass incarceration, but – like Jade – they are only responsible for expressing their individual reflections on that history if they choose to reflect on it.

Individual artistic freedom is held sacred in The Network. I asked Andy how this works in practice one afternoon in The Network conference room: “Who decides what kind of work gets included in exhibitions or what kind of music gets performed in The Space?” “The artist decides,” she replied. She explained that, though the programming team (led by Justin) comes up with event themes and invites artists to participate, those artists respond to those themes in any way they choose. The programming team facilitates opportunities for artists to be seen, but it does not dictate what they should present. This reminded me of a conversation I’d had with Danny, The Network’s program assistant. One of his jobs is to coordinate with performers for The Network’s concert series, helping them turn their vision into an executable event, and I asked how he manages the events to reflect The Network’s brand. His role, he said, was to facilitate the event and work with the artist to present their vision. It was not his role to impose an artistic vision on them.

Not only does The Network abdicate creative control over the art produced for or during its events, but they also resist adjudicating quality or appropriateness. “There has been stuff in here,” she said, “that I know staff members have not cared for. But, at the end of the day, that’s going to speak differently to some people, so we’ve left it as open as possible.” Acknowledging

that, Andy conceded that the idea of creating a safe creative space for artists to express themselves without limits could conflict with her desire to create a safe space for audiences if the artists insisted on presenting work that was triggering. Even there, however, she felt that the description of an art piece as triggering would likely speak to only one experience of it and could be too subjective to be useful.

I'm sure we have had work up that was triggering. But like how do we ensure that it's not intentionally hurtful? And we've never run into that. We've had hard conversations where people have said weird things. But in terms of artwork, that would be, I think, our only stipulation. (Andy)

Andy's concern over presenting triggering work in The Space is indicative of the audience's role in The Network's artistic ecosystem.

When Andy said that art works “speak differently to some people,” she alluded to the important role that audiences play in The Space. While artists' creative autonomy is protected, the audience is invited to participate in a conversational process of meaning-making that draws on their individual experiences. This was new to me. As a classical musician and dutiful consumer of Eurocentric art, I am used to being told how to interpret the cultural artifacts I encounter. Whether through research on composers or painters or the extensive program notes on offer at most opera or symphony performances, I rely on critics and art historians to tell me how to interpret art. This might have been why I was so uncomfortable at the Stranger's concert. Instead of appreciating that the lack of explanation gave me space to interpret from my own experience, I wanted to know how I *should* think about the performance. It was not only at the Stranger's concert that I experienced this. Additionally, every gallery show I attended (except FIBER) presented visual art without contextualizing materials. I had trouble making sense of this until I began speaking to Network staff.

One of my interview questions asked artists to recall any memorable audience interactions they had in The Space. Johnny, a member of The Network's community engagement team and regular exhibitor in their gallery shows, described their experience at FIBER. "It was very cryptic work," they said. Johnny makes it a habit to be near their work at gallery shows, to be available to audience members who often ask if Johnny is the painter. If audience members ask, Johnny explains the message or experiences behind the pieces, but audience members often launch straight into explaining their own interpretations.

One dude showed me this cover of a Marvin Gaye album I've never heard of, and he was like, "This reminds me of that song that's on here. You should listen to it." I was like, "OK!" But also people who went through similar things and really connected with it... I always like connecting with those folks because of the camaraderie. People see stuff, they'll spend some time with it, and then they'll just kind of ask around or find out who somebody is and start asking questions. It's very, very intimate. (Johnny)

Like the Stranger's concert, FIBER and the other Network exhibitions broke down the barrier between audience space and artist space, encouraging creatives and community members to engage in collaborative meaning-making.

The purpose of this collaborative meaning-making is twofold: to allow creatives to explore and grapple with their individual experiences and voices in a safe space and to inspire hope and happiness in audience members. While Network members emphasize that art-making and access to art are important for everyone, they argue that it is especially important for Black artists and Black audiences to have access to expressive outlets. Stephanie, a member of The Network's development team and artist-curator of the FIBER exhibition explained it this way:

It's therapeutic. I think that it is a healthy way for people to address things going on with their mental health, their physical health. It's an emotion-based thing – people feel better when they can express themselves. It doesn't feel good when they have to hold all that stuff in. If you really lay it on thick and heavy, Black people in The City don't have access to things because they can't afford them or because they're too busy working two or three

jobs to make ends meet. If you're drudging along day to day and the only thing you can think about is, "Oh, I've got to get some sleep and some food in my body before I go to the next job," that's a personal hell, you know? So, art allows them, if only for a moment, something that can break through, it takes away from having to live like that. (Stephanie)

Echoing these ideas, Andy referred to art as a “hope generator,” something that can help people coping with extreme stress to find understanding, meaning, and hope for change.

This idea – that art is therapeutic and inspiring for both artists and audience members facing significant challenges – was echoed by several Network members, but Johnny provided an example of why it was particularly helpful to make art in a place like The Space. Johnny is extremely talented. Their art is bold, expressive, symbolic, assertive. It plays with figures and forms in ways that challenge reality, seeming to evoke something deeper than the world we can see and hear. For a long time, though, Johnny’s art was a way to cope with depression, anxiety, and an isolating home life. They leaned into the idea of the tortured genius, feeling like maybe all of their creativity came from personal pain, unsure what else they might have to offer, doubting that they deserve health and happiness. Eventually, Johnny moved on from their painful home life and began to find healthier ways of living. In the course of that personal growth, though, they decided it was no longer healthy to create art rooted in pain and anxiety. Now, on the healthier side of their journey, Johnny is struggling to find their artistic feet.

I don't think I've finished a piece in months because I'm just trying to find out what the hell.... And it's weird. It's a weird good place to be in because there is no limit, which is also scary. So I'm kind of figuring out more things to pull from and how to go about it in a healthier way. (Johnny)

The Network provides a space in which Johnny can explore their individual voice, continue to process their trauma in a supportive environment, and test out new ideas.

The Network's definition of art privileges artistic independence and connection between the artist and their audience. This audience is not conceptualized as a unified and homogenous community, though. Rather, it is a collection of individuals who bring their own experiences to bear in interpreting and interacting with artistic work. Thus, The Network's definition of art is fundamentally individualistic, hoping to inspire positivity through a million individual connections. This ideology is different from either the protected treasure or the community tool ideologies (McDonnell and Tepper 2014), and it casts art as a force that is alive for definition and redefinition by audiences and artists. Because those audiences and artists are predominantly Black, however, The Network must undertake strenuous work to support their viability.

***Creating a Conducive Environment: "We are the people who need this." (Jade)***

In my final interview with Andy, I asked what her current elevator pitch of The Network's mission is one year after moving into The Space. "It's very short and sweet," she said, "elevating Black artists, empowering Black communities, and shifting the culture. I think it literally happens in that order." For Andy, artists come first because they are able to communicate the diverse, interesting, bold stories that inspire community cooperation and cultural shifts. If The Network is committed to its philosophy of art as the living expression of individual artists in conversation with individual audience members, they must attend to the needs of that living organism. Living art needs artists to propagate it, ground to nurture it, and audiences to enjoy it, and the current arts structure in The City does not sufficiently secure the right of Black artists and audiences to prominent roles in that ecosystem. Thus, The Network does not use art as a tool to rectify systemic injustice. It must work toward justice to ensure the future of art.

Stephanie, a member of The Network’s development team and the artist-curator of FIBER, told me the story about how she first got involved with The Network. It was 2014, and Andy had convened a meeting of Black artists and Black arts supporters to discuss the need for a group that might focus on the needs of Black artists. In Stephanie’s recollection, it wasn’t artists, but their supporters, who raised urgent concerns about the viability of Black artists in The City. Artists they admired could not seem to get access to the gallery space necessary to sell their work, they didn’t get the same media coverage as their White counterparts, and they rarely seemed to have control over the presentation of their work. This meeting inspired The Network – both Stephanie and Justin joined immediately. “We’re just working for an equal playing field,” Stephanie said. “for the opportunity to show what we can do, to not be tokenized, to compete and survive and thrive.” In working to elevate Black artists, The Network works to secure their access to the spaces and resources that allow creative Black people to become viable working artists.

The need for greater investment in Black artists extends beyond the arts sector, as well. Jade argues that by focusing on ideas about Black creativity that are rooted in the 1950s and 60s, the city is overlooking its chief cultural export: hip-hop. Because of this, The City is falling further and further behind the regional powerhouses of Atlanta and Nashville. “Atlanta pours into its Black artists, they’ve harnessed that power, and they’re a juggernaut because of it,” Jade insists. “Meanwhile, The City is trying its hardest to be Nashville, to be something it’s not.” Since The City refuses to capitalize on its Black creatives (a phenomenon that David referred to as a “purposeful erasure of Blackness”), The Network must create opportunities and increase the visibility of Black artists in The City, or as Jade puts it, “we’ll all have to go somewhere else.”

It is not only the White-dominated arts and city structures that threaten the viability of Black artists, though. Ilona, Johnny, Justin, Danny, and Jade all spoke about the need to raise the profile of arts careers within the Black community. Ilona, a highly regarded local photographer, told me, “My dad still asks when I’m going to start working on my career.” Similarly, Danny, The Network’s program assistant, suggested that he invites his family to Network events in part so that they can see he is doing something meaningful with his time, not “just chillin’.” Justin joined Danny and Ilona in explaining that there is tremendous pressure on young Black men to choose a traditional, steady career that will provide for a family. Johnny and Jade argued that this pressure does not only impact Black men but is shared among Black artists of all genders. “White people don’t realize,” Ilona told me, “that we are really very conservative. You’re supposed to get a job, work, and move up the ladder.” For The Network, solving this problem involves connecting with audience members at shows and events and investing in arts programs for children, encouraging them to consider the arts as a viable, respectable career choice.

Andy describes all of The Network’s work to elevate artists, engage communities, and shift the culture of The City as an effort to “flip the script,” remaking arts systems in ways that better serve the needs and artistic philosophies of Black artists and Black audiences. At one point in a conversation, I asked her how she responds to people who insist that art is not as important as work to feed people, improve schools, or address persistent poverty. She responded by telling me a story about a recent meeting she’d attended in support of another arts organization’s pitch for mayoral support. “The mayor kept referring to artists as ‘finger painters,’” she said, “Like, ‘I can’t pay for this if you are just going to have someone finger painting,’ and I just...” She shuddered, getting her back up like a cat about to pounce, and responded to him:

While community members are waiting on your policy to change their life or waiting to feel its effects, a lot of them are writing songs. A lot of them are painting. Quite literally these are the things – even if we go as far back as like slavery, with enslaved Africans singing songs because that's literally all they've got. In a lot of instances, that is all some of us have. Like right now, all I know is that my school is shitty and nothing around me is being invested in. Even if I don't have the language to describe these things, these are things I'm aware of. And if going home and writing this rap helps me see through the night to the next day, then why would we not empower that experience? (Andy)

To Andy, the idea that art should follow so-called basic needs is rooted in a Eurocentric view of art as something “hoity-toity,” separate from the day to day lived experiences of people struggling, growing, and connecting through life. The story about the mayor illustrated the gap between her understanding of the role of art as a living mode of individual expression and human connection and the public policy view of art as something additive, at best a tool to achieve some measurable end. Because of this, The Network does not have the luxury of indulging in art-for-art's-sake ideologies but must nurture and cultivate its living art by “flipping the script” on an inequitable system. Activism is an existential imperative.

***Looking to the Future: “To just paint flowers.” (Jade)***

For The Network, art is an individual creative expression that is rooted in lived experience and should not be critiqued, censored, or contextualized by anyone other than the artist. It is accessible to audience members who connect with it according to their individual needs and experiences. This joint process of meaning-making contributes to the individual health, hope, and happiness of both artists and audience members. For now, enacting this definition requires significant attention to the conditions that facilitate or impede Black creative work in The City. What if The Network were able to make significant change, though? What if their view of art took hold and allowed them to focus only on expression?

During our conversation late one afternoon, I asked Jade whether The Network could divorce its activism from its art, whether artists have a responsibility to be change agents. She said:

My first inclination would be to say there is a responsibility, but the reality is that everybody is not making art from the same place and I think Black people should be free to make art for the sake of art, just like anybody else. Black people should get the freedom to be nonpolitical – to just paint flowers, if that’s their thing. (Jade)

This quote encapsulates the complexity underlying The Network’s approach to art. It is highly individualistic, protecting an artist’s creative independence to do “their thing,” whatever that is. But Jade’s *shoulds* emphasize that this is an ideal version of reality, a goal for the future. For now, The Network’s definition of art work includes attention to the circumstances that make life as Black artist difficult. Working for better representation in local media is as critical to art work as prepping a canvas. Encouraging young children to consider the arts as a viable career is as critical as tuning your instrument. Artmaking is inseparable from the conditions of one’s life, and while there is strength in the suffering artist trope (as Johnny and I discussed), The Network is rejecting that as well. Artists are culture-makers and meaning-makers who deserve to live lives in which their needs are met and there are prospects for success. Though Jade would like Black artists to have the option to paint flowers, to embrace art-making that is purely aesthetic and completely nonpolitical, that option seems a long way off. As Andy once told me, “artists have to eat” – if the environment does not support Black artists, there really can be no art at all.

## 5. DISCUSSION

I asked two questions to begin this study: what does artistic practice look like for The Network, and what are the implications for the art field more broadly? My findings suggest that The Network's artistic practice is artist-centered, that it maximizes opportunities for connection, and that it represents the degree to which dominant models may fail to understand the organizational values and approaches of minority-led arts organizations. The Network staff and artists that I spoke to communicated this in myriad ways and contexts, but I was able to identify these priorities in three primary areas: The Network's relationship to Pine Hill, its organizational strategies, and its working definition of art. Each aspect of The Network's work, when understood as Network members themselves understand it, proves to be pivotally – if sometimes subtly – different from the approaches that currently dominate the arts field.

The Network's relationship to Pine Hill is rooted in respect for the neighborhood's history, its unique cultural assets, and the opportunity for connection that it represents. The Space is located in Pine Hill not because of what The Network can offer the neighborhood but because of what the neighborhood offers The Network: an ever-present reminder of the power of Black resistance and placemaking, a connection to a Black cultural identity, and a sense of safety from White surveillance and creative tokenization. The Network's view of Pine Hill supports Hunter and Robinson's (2018) assertion that Black-majority places are sites of power and cultural importance in Black American life that may be best understood via asset-focused

analyses rooted in the knowledge of Black people. It was only by centering the Network staff member's experiences and understanding of Pine Hill that I was able to manage my own biases about the place, a place I had only known as the impoverished site of many an arts-based intervention.

Just as my pre-study framing of Pine Hill was inaccurate, so the dominant models explaining the relationship between arts organizations and place are inaccurate. The Network is not a creative cities-style engine for economic growth (Florida 2002), nor is it a creative placemaking effort meant to assist the community in addressing some intractable problem (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). This has important implications for project- and place-based arts funding policy, especially in the creative placemaking era (Frenette 2017; Markusen and Nicodemus 2014). The Network is seriously concerned about the prospect that its work could contribute to gentrification in Pine Hill. Network staff – especially Andy, Justin, and Jade – raised this concern repeatedly in our conversations. As a result, The Network is skeptical of corporate or nonprofit interventions born from outside the neighborhood.

Furthermore, Network members voiced philosophical objections to the idea that place *needs to be made* in Pine Hill or any other Black-majority area of the City. In contrast, they argue, places already exist and assets abound, they are just systematically underfunded and underrecognized. Again, this reflects Hunter and Robinson's (2018) emphasis on Black Americans as prolific placemakers who have done so despite the systemic oppression they face. As Bedoya (2013) argued, any place-based projects must attend not only to the built and economic characteristics of a neighborhood, but to its culture, values, practices, and unique history. It is precisely The Network's attention to Pine Hill's culture, values, and unique history

– a history of resistance via placemaking – that the organization make it skeptical of the creative placemaking ideology.

Whether out of a concern for potential complicity in gentrification or a philosophical objection to deficit-focused analyses of Black-majority places, The Network is distant from the dominant ideologies of art and place. I do not argue that this is necessarily true of all Black-led arts organizations – or even all Black-led arts organizations in Pine Hill; however, it suggests a significant ideological separation between funders and the organizations most in need of support, a state of affairs that exacerbates existing inequity (Sidford and Frasz 2017).

Most of my conversations with Network staff – both in interviews and in more casual settings – involved some discussion of organizational pressures, especially concerns about the limitations of an all-volunteer staff. I never heard anyone complain about not getting paid as though the organization was exploiting them (though it is, of course, not impossible that staff members might feel this and simply not tell me), rather staff members were bothered that, by needing to maintain a day job they could not devote enough time to The Network and also pursue their own artmaking. Just as these staff members prioritize the organization’s needs, the organization prioritizes theirs. The Network’s approach to its organizational needs is best characterized as a quest to support its artist-staff and ensure its autonomy, through which it serves its mission.

Funding is a constant area of concern for arts organizations, and The Network is disadvantaged from a funding perspective by its focus on a specific racial group (Sidford and Frasz 2017). While the organization understands this – especially in moments when it is forced to explain the importance of equity over diversity – it is wary of the compromises necessary to secure funding from White-led organizations and of the strings attached. Autonomy is paramount

to The Network, and it is working to develop revenue strategies that will free it from funder oversight. In the meantime, they do more with less, and staff told me about times in which they'd paid for food for a gallery opening, supplies to hang art, or other organizational needs out of their own pockets and made things happen out of the sheer force of collective will and smart social networking. This reflects White's (2018) finding that minority-led arts nonprofits regularly work around constraints and constraining systems by "engaging in entrepreneurial actions and utilizing their shared agency to make script changes in the nonprofit sector" (2018:296). Though these "script changes" often lead to push-back from currently dominant actors in the field, in the aggregate, they can transform arts fields. Again, Hunter and Robinson (2018) shed light on this as well, arguing that Black-majority places (in this case, a Black-majority organization) are locations in which economic power may be activated to resist the infringement and violence of White-dominated systems.

In prioritizing the needs of its artists-staff and working to creatively reimagine revenue for maximum freedom, The Network provides an example of an organization in which organizational needs cannot easily be separated from the organizational mission. This troubles organizational analyses that cast mission as paramount and organizational survival as secondary (Minkoff and Powell 2006). This has potentially huge implications, as arts organizations increasingly enact their mission through discreet projects, widening the gap between ongoing organizational needs and fundable programs. For minority-led arts organizations, barriers to entry are so high, that simply existing may become a mission in itself (White 2018), and this mission deserves support.

While The Network works to secure an organizational foothold in a deeply inequitable arts system (Sidford and Frasz 2017), it is also challenging ideas about the value of art. The

nonprofit arts sector has long been dominated by an art-as-treasure (McDonnell and Tepper 2014) or art-for-art's-sake (Dewey 2003) ideology. Both emphasize the vital role that arts organizations play in stewarding and contextualizing artwork. Ivey (2008) argues that these ideologies perpetuate an elitist, Eurocentric arts system, and Andy seems to agree, characterizing these views as “hoity-toity.” On the other hand, recent arts ideologies, especially in the creative cities and creative placemaking veins (Florida 2002; Markusen and Gadwa 2010), construct art as a tool that may be leveraged to achieve a project goal. The Network's approach to art differs from this ideology, as well. While they do not argue against the value of art to spur action, they see its real value in the individual experiences of artists and audience members.

In conversations with The Network's staff, I often asked what guides their artmaking. The most common answer was a desire to communicate with people, to connect, to assuage some pain, to spark some new thinking. To facilitate arts programming that emphasizes audience experience, Andy and the staff work to “flip the gallery on its head,” throwing out conventions that define galleries as quiet places in which you shouldn't touch, shouldn't engage with others, and should be guided by what the artist or critic instructs you to think about a piece. Instead, The Space is a raucous place during gallery shows – there is music, people talk, kids play. And, in this bustle, artists and audiences connect. Audience members are invited to interpret work according to their own needs, seeing their experience of art as no less valid than the artists'. This is why The Network refuses to dedicate itself to one artistic discipline or to censor artist work: it is not their role to decide how audiences connect with art. They are simply the facilitator of a living arts experience in which meaning is made in a constant conversation between artist, art, and audience.

To construct art as a living, dialogic process through which people come to understand themselves and their world is to center the human in it. The transformative potential of this ideology cannot be overstated, as it directly challenges ideas of art as a luxury, pointing to art as a human right. Though I do not argue that this view of art is unique to The Network, this study provides an example of it in action. In doing so, the dominant arts paradigms – treasure or tool – are reduced to only two of many possible approaches to art. While they are not inherently problematic in and of themselves, The Network’s contrasting example provides evidence of how they are currently mobilized to perpetuate Eurocentric arts hierarchies (Ivey 2008; McDonnell and Tepper 2014) and serve economic interests (Bedoya 2013; Grodach et al. 2018; Ley 2003).

In its approach to place, its strategy to address organizational needs, and its working definition of art, The Network consistently prioritizes connection and the needs of Black artists. In doing so, they are working to remake an arts system that does not serve their needs into one that honors and advances their voices. If they are successful, they may create the future Justin looks to in asking, “What if people didn’t have to leave to be successful?” In working for artist and audience needs, though, The Network makes clear the significant experiential and philosophical difference separating them from dominant players and ideologies in The City and the wider arts field. As Sidford and Frasz (2017) and White (2018) point out, while these organizations struggle within an inequitable arts system, they have an outsized impact on their communities and the sector at large. Scholars and practitioners must adjust or, more likely, scrap current paradigms that do not seek out and incorporate the knowledge of these path-breaking organizations. Though The Network’s experience is its own and should not be read as indicative of Black arts organizations specifically or minority-led organizations more broadly, it

exemplifies the need for greater attention to minority-led arts organizations and minority art perspectives.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Network is working to secure a foothold – to “hold space,” as Andy often says – for creatively free, widely respected Black art in The City. Andy told me once, as we sat across The Network’s conference table, that they work incredibly hard and plan recklessly ambitious plans because the history of Black progress is not linear. “We make gains”, she said, “and then we get pushed back.” The Network’s goal is to make as much progress as possible while some financial support and local and national attention are on their side. If they can manage that, then when they get pushed back, there will still be something to show for all their effort. Andy, Justin, Stephanie, Jade, Johnny, Danny, and the other Network members who were kind enough to speak with me emphasized that they are only the most contemporary iteration of a long history of Black work toward progress. Other organizations may not have had the resources or the “divine timing” (Justin) that The Network has, but those earlier groups laid pivotal foundations that The Network is working hard to build upon as it carves out a place for sustainable Black art in The City.

The project is an effort to hold The Network’s space in the scholarly literature, as well. As a White researcher, my attempt to represent their work was fraught with missteps and jarring occasions for growth. I needed to be constantly aware and aware again of my tendency to impose external frames on The Network as a group and on its staff members as individuals. Having read *Chocolate Cities* (Hunter and Robinson 2018) the fall before this research began, I had the good fortune of seeing an alternative framework laid out before me. While I had to guard against my

tendency to impose *Chocolate Cities* (Hunter and Robinson 2018) on The Network as well, setting the *chocolate cities framework* in opposition to the dominant frames in which I was raised and educated unmoored me somewhat from my default attention to the latter. While this was often a disorienting experience, Hunter and Robinson (2018) provided guidance for a way through: center the knowledge and experiences of Network members, who – as culture workers – are well-positioned to see and understand. This is what I have attempted to do, and I am sure I failed in some places just as I succeeded in others.

In our last meeting, I gave Andy a general overview of what I would report as my findings here. She said that they rang true and was interested in learning about the literature that informed the work. As she browsed online for one of the books, she said, “This feels very true. I’m just trying to think about how we can use it.” The reality is that The Network does not need this work. It understands itself and its approach to the art world. It is the art world, which has consistently and systemically devalued the work and ideas of minority culture workers and organizations, that needs this work. Scholars have not paid enough attention to these voices, and this work contributes to filling that gap. At the end of all of this, what I aspire to have accomplished is what The Network and its members do every day - to hold space.

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## APPENDIX

## APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How would you describe yourself to someone you've never met?

*Question 1 is intended to find out what identities the respondent claims – race, gender, occupation, education level, socioeconomic class, or other characteristics – and to begin to see the world through their eyes.*

2. Can you describe your role in the Collective? How did you first get involved?
3. How would you describe the Collective's mission?
4. What does the mission mean to you?
5. What, in your opinion, makes the Collective well-suited for this work?

*Questions 2-5 are intended to establish the respondent's connection to the Collective, both organizationally and philosophically/emotionally, as well as their history with the group.*

6. Do you consider yourself an artist?
7. What is the story of you as an artist? What inspires you as an artist?
8. How do you think about relationship between an artist and her/his community?
9. Has your work with the Collective impacted your own artistic work?

*Questions 6-9 are intended to establish how the respondent thinks of their own art-making, what they value most in their art, how they connect artist and community, and how they see the relationship between the organization and their own art-making.*

10. Could you tell me a little bit about your experience with Orange Mound?
11. What, in your mind, is the most important thing about this community?
12. Is it important that the Complex be located in this particular community? Why?
13. Have you been able to interact with community residents during the Collective's work? Can you tell me about a time?

*Questions 11-14 are intended to elicit the respondent's reflections on the role of place in the Collective's work and goals and their own relationship to Orange Mound.*

14. What is the most important part of the Collective's work?
15. Who is this work for? How do you feel about outsiders in this space?
16. Is there anything you would change about the way the Collective's priorities?
17. What roadblocks stand in the way of the Collective meeting its goals?
18. Fast-forward ten years: What would you like the impact of the Collective to be?
19. As you know, I used to work for a longstanding Memphis arts organization. What would you like organizations like that to learn from the Collective?

*Questions 15-19 are intended to gather the respondent's personal reflection on the current state of the Collective's work and its impediments, as well their hopes for the organization and its larger impact on the community and the arts field.*

20. What did I NOT ask about that you think is important? Is there anything else you think I should know?

## VITA

Tierney A. Bamrick was raised in Memphis, Tennessee with deep family ties to Buffalo, New York, as well. She has a bachelor's degree in music from Vanderbilt University and a master's degree in music from the University of Colorado at Boulder. After completing her master's in music with a concentration in opera performance, she moved home to Memphis to accept a position in arts marketing and community outreach, which she held for five years. During that time, she became involved in discussions at both the local and national levels about persistent inequity in the U.S. arts system. Inspired by these conversations and her own experiences in the field as both a performer and administrator, she enrolled in the sociology program at the University of Mississippi, completing a master's degree in 2020. Her research focuses on the nonprofit arts sector with specific attention to intersectional inequity, Eurocentric cultural hegemony, and public policy.