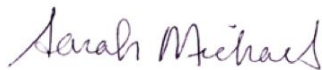# "All Kinds of Girls, But Not All Kinds of Mentors?":

Decolonizing Whiteness in an Urban-Youth Program & Creating Radical Change

Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

Nia Slater-Bookhart

Committee Signatures:

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Sarah Michaels

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Eric DeMeulenaere

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Fatima Orta

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Chapter One: Introduction

Welcome To My Thesis.

So, you found yourself in a chair somewhere. You also have found yourself reading my honors thesis on your computer, so please do get comfortable. Grab your favorite tea, because trust me, there will be a lot of tea*[1] spilled here in all the best ways. Just kidding. But I do promise to reveal some truths that are necessary for this unjust world to know.

You may be one of my Community, Youth, and Education Studies (CYES) faculty advisers or one of the members of my project committee. Welcome. More surprising, you might be someone who asked me: "Well, I like to learn more about how problematic urban youth programs can be, so may I read your Honors Thesis?" and I excitedly responded, "Yes! Please do!" Welcome. If you are neither of the two, still welcome as I try to be inclusive in any space I occupy and in any theses I write. Well, welcome all to my Honors Thesis.

As all of us academic folks know, writing an honors thesis can be a daunting task. You have to organize a pretty lengthy piece of writing, meet with your faculty advisers thousands of times (many times to cry from frustrations), manage your time (in this sense, manage your greatest skill of all: procrastination), attempt to still figure out a way to define what a conceptual framework is in the midst of writing the conceptual framework (CYES inside joke), go through the painstaking task of transcribing ALL of your 30 minute audio recordings, etc, etc, etc….

Well, I saved you from your own daunting task of having to read the boring honors thesis. I have taken a spin on the typical academic style of writing such a paper. While I hope to still keep things academic, I also would like for you as one of my amazing readers, to be able to hear my own voice and understand my positionality in light of this project, which are so closely tied. Who

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[1] Tea- via the always trustworthy and reliable site, UrbanDictionary.com, it is defined as: the best kind of gossip, typically shared between peers.. it's a bonding tool for people of all ages. tea is usually about someone you know, but can also extend to celebrities random internet scandals, etc.

I am, the type of work that I do, and my praxis project are truly deeply connected- and, you will see why. I will be switching between what I will say is indeed one voice, yet the distinction that you will see (other than the obvious italics) is the different ways in which I will use this one voice. With this one voice, I use various "discourses" to get to the same goal. In my one voice I will use academic jargon in one line, then in the very next line will use ebonics. To me, There will be no code switching here. This one voice is authentically and unapologetically me: A Black woman who was raised in the hood, and was told she would never leave. A Black woman who is a first-generation college student and soon to graduate, and was told she would never make it. A Black woman who was constantly told her existence was a problem in this world, but nevertheless, she still existed and remained resilient. A Black woman whose her ancestors' wildest dreams...

I am a Black woman who is writing her senior honors thesis with her heart poured into every word typed, and with the highest of hopes, that the love that she brought to her work spreads beyond the borders of this paper, but into the world.

The Beginning: "Entering New Spaces and I Got YOU"

Fall 2015: First Semester at Clark University. (Worcester, Massachusetts)

My first week of college was the hardest. I had never felt such a disconnect from my family, my culture, my home...my life. All that I knew and loved was more than a thousand miles back home in Tampa. Let me be honest. Clark was really white, more white than I expected. I was in a sense culture shocked from the whiteness. What I mean is... that Clark has a sort of whiteness that I never quite been exposed to. The sort of whiteness that made me confront my own identity as a Black female from the south. I spoke with a southern twang and used ebonics in every conversation I had, no matter who I spoke with.

That was until I met with my financial aid counselor, a white woman, who made it clear that the way I spoke was deemed incorrect. I had used the word "ain't" frequently and had described my family as "my folks".

She kept this sort of smilish-frown whenever I spoke, as if she was forcing herself to smile but was truly disgusted on the inside. At the end of our meeting, she plainly said:

"... I tried to hold myself back from telling you this, but I thought this would be useful advice for someone like you. When speaking in professional spaces, such as a meeting as this with your financial aid counselor, the use of slang like 'ain't' and describing your family as your 'folks' is not proper english or professional, therefore should not be used in such spaces. I can only imagine what an employer would think if you spoke like this during an interview…" She laughs.

I look at her, biting my tongue for the words I wanted to say so badly. So, I just said: "Thanks." and I quickly grabbed my things, and walked out.

This was my first encounter at Clark. This was my very first experience of being negatively confronted with my own identity at Clark, and trust, it was not my last. The whole first week of being at college, I had been questioned not only about the way I spoke.... but the way I fashioned my hair, the food I chose to eat, the music that I played, my big bamboo earrings in my ears, my long eccentric nails. Everything about me was too different, too southern, "too 'ghetto'" as I heard a white student whispered about me to his friend on our first day of class.

These experiences all within the very first week of college, for me, set the tone for how I would move in spaces I would occupy at Clark. Clark was too white for me, and I in turn, was too Black for them.

It was the second week at Clark. I had since called my parents numerous times, I would sob on the phone and attempt to make the strongest case that I could not be at Clark any longer. I had told them about all of the confrontations I had with not only the white students, but also white faculty. I had the pleasure of being mistaken for another Black female student in my class by my history professor numerous times. And yes, you guessed right. Her and I looked nothing alike. In fact, she was lighter-skinned, and I am quite darker-skinned.

My history professor never once apologized, but instead complained, "Oh, my poor mind. Maybe not sit so close together?"

Her and I exchanged a look of shock, but also sadness and anger. Meanwhile, our white classmates either chuckled or smiled at our professor's "absent-mindness".

I counted down to my parents the numerous microaggressions, and near altercations. They kept urging me to push through for a semester and then I could leave, and then I could at least say I survived a semester of college.

But, how does one survive in such a space?

I settled knowing that my parents had used up their savings to put me in my first semester of college. I had to watch them struggle to make ends meet to ensure that their baby girl went to college, out of state at that, so she can experience a world outside her own.

But this world I stepped into seemed to keep pushing me out and I could not find a way in.

I had finally found a way in.

In one of my education classes, it was mandatory that all students find a placement where they would be able to engage with youth and education. Most students, like myself, had been placed in classrooms in an urban school, specifically in Main South.

What is Main South?
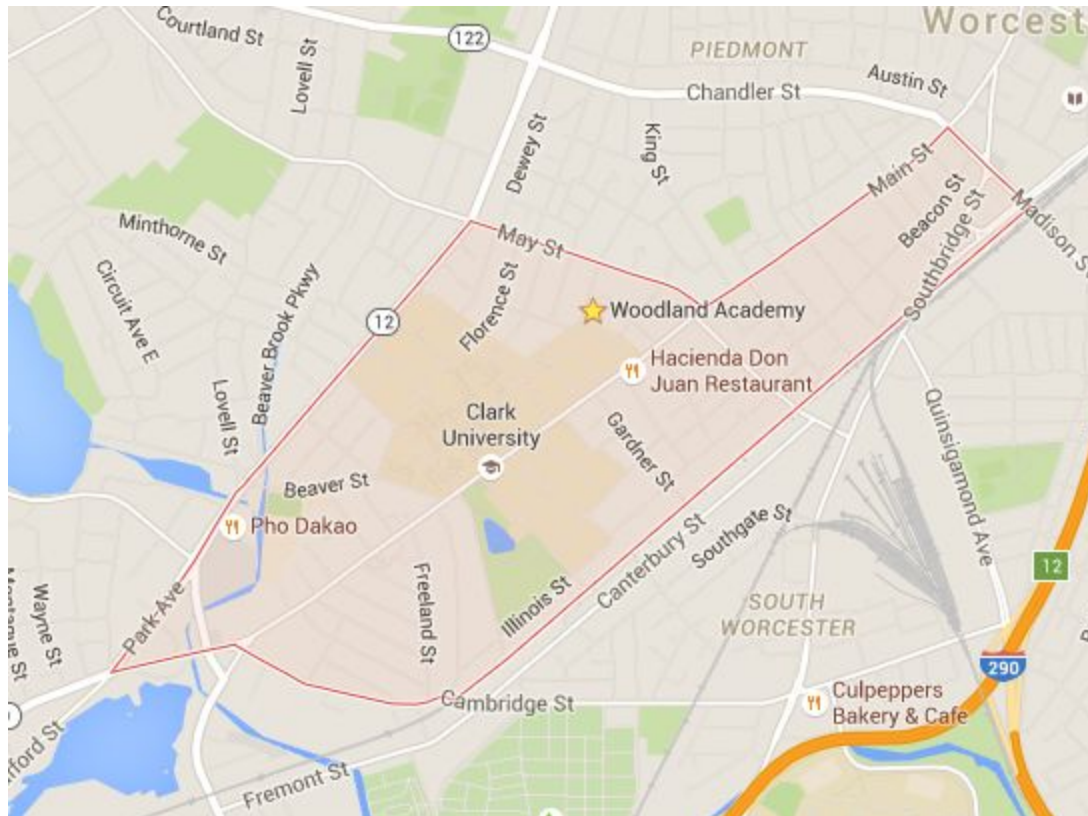
The Main South neighborhood, where Clark is located within, is considered the poorest neighborhood in Worcester, Massachusetts. While I marveled at the immense diverse cultures and languages I heard, and fell in love with how much the community reminded me of my own home... I was constantly being reminded by Clark students how "terrible" Main South was. They were scared to walk the streets, as they thought any time they step foot off campus, there was this high chance they could get robbed or kidnapped. They always reminded me about all the drug addicts and homeless people on the streets and the amount of trash on the streets..They

never said anything positive. I would tell people I had walked to the corner store right down the block at mid-day, and the white students would ask me "You felt safe?! You didn't get robbed?!"

I would look at them puzzled and laugh. "Yes I felt safe. And no, I did not get robbed."

As I reflect back, this mostly came from students that were mainly white. Some of them shocked me in their perceptions, as some of these very people come from urban cities, like Boston and Brooklyn, where these very stigmas are alive and well within their own cities. So what is the difference? I have concluded, in my own informed opinion and have been proven right most times, that these people came from very gentrified and homogenous areas from these urban cities.

During class, we would share out our experiences at our placements. One of the female students shared her experiences at her placement. It was at a female-youth program held at Clark, called All Kinds of Girls. The program ran by Undergraduate female students, for girls ages 9-15 from predominantly the Main South neighborhood. She served as a Coordinator for the older girls curriculum. She had shared out in just our second week of classes her frustrations with the program she had been in for a year. For the sake of her privacy, I will name her Vanessa.

Vanessa had shared to the class that she had felt conflicted. She was apart of a program where it served predominantly urban girls of color, yet the mentors were 99% white from suburban areas of a city. When she had first started the program, she never noticed this. As she became more involved and fell in love with mentoring and the girls, she began to notice the issues around the lack of diversity and racial representation amongst the mentors. This became even more evident, when one of the mentors came to her regarding an issue with her mentee. The mentee had opened up to the mentor about being kicked out of class because she didn't speak english well. She often spoke Spanish to her classmates to understand what she was learning. The teacher became frustrated and kicked her out of class, because "only english is spoken in the classroom". The mentor, in a honest confession, explained that she did not know how to help

her mentee, so she froze up. The mentee wanted advice and received none. That mentee never returned to AKOG again. When called to check on the mentee, the parent replied that her daughter would not return because of the mentor.

After class, I had pulled Vanessa aside to inquire about how to get involved in the program as a mentor. I began to tell her my vast experiences of being a counselor of two years at my local Boys and Girls Club, and even my own experience as a youth within various mentor programs.

She smiled and asked, "Oh wow, you have a lot of experience. Impressive. Are you free on Saturdays?"

I replied with excitement, "Yes I am. All day!"

She responded, "Well that's great! All Kinds of Girls program is held on Saturdays in Atwood Hall from 10am till about 3pm. You can work alongside me and six other mentors, with the older girls. They are ages 13-15. Can you come this Saturday, it will be our first day?

I replied, "Yes, of course!"

It was my first day of the AKOG. I walked in filled with such nervousness and anxiousness. I did not know what to expect, as there was no sort of orientation or training provided.

Vanessa was right. As soon as I walked into the building, I was greeted by all white women who looked very confused with my presence. One of the woman walked up and asked, "Are you one of our new girls, you're quite early! Have you registered yet?"

I responded quite confused. "Uh no. Hi, I am one of the new mentors, Vanessa invited me."

My body became tense.

Before the woman could respond with a puzzled look on her face, Vanessa ran in the room with a big smile on her face. "Thank God!" I thought to myself.

Vanessa shouted out to everyone, "Good morning ladies, this is one of our new mentors for the older girls, Nia!"

Everyone smiled, and quietly said hello.

The theme for this Saturday was 'All About You' Day. The leadership team prepped everyone for the day, giving us a schedule and we did some fun energizing games before the girls arrived. Vanessa grabbed the other six mentors and myself , and we all went upstairs in a huge classroom.

She re-introduced me to the six mentors I would be working closely with. There was five white woman and one woman of color. We had some pretty superficial conversations, mostly about two of the mentors summer of backpacking in Asia and Europe, in which their parents happily financed.

It was time.

When the girls arrived, I began to feel less anxious than I did when I first walked in. Instead, I began to feel a connection to home.

Each girl came in unapologetically themselves. Speaking their native tongues, slang, and ebonics. Wearing their natural tresses, curly, afros and braids, accessorized their outfits with big 'bamboo' hoop earrings and long brightly colored nails They blasted their favorite Hip-Hop,

Reggaeton, Afrobeat songs from their phones and walked in dancing. They embraced each other in hugs, big smiles loud laughter and conversation after a summer long break from the program.

I was in awe. I was home.

Each girl that walked in the room paused and looked at me with such surprise, then instantly smiled. In return, I would smile too. I would walk over and introduce myself, and they would do the same. Sooner or later, all of the girls seemed to have surrounded me as we sang Fetty Wap's new song 'Trap Queen' and danced. I began to notice that mentors around me were just sitting around staring at the girls and I with a sort've shocked look on their faces. One of the mentors asked another mentor, "What song is this? Is this Drake?"

The girls and I laughed so hard at the question and the mentor lack of urban music knowledge. Instead of making things awkward, I urged the mentors to join us in dances, They slowly joined.

After the morning of planned activities created by Vanessa, we had lunch. One of the girls, Unique[2], asked to speak to me in private. We both grabbed our plates of food and found desks at the back of the room, away from everyone.

Unique and Nia. Spring 2018. 'AKOG's Community Youth Day'.

[2] Pseudonym for privacy of the mentee.

Unique is a 12 year old, Black girl who wears her identity loud and proud. Her hair is fashioned in two fro' ponytail puffs, her crew neck shirts had the words stretched across: "I am Black and Beautiful", her skin color as dark as mine. She was an unapologetic young Black girl, and I admired her.

The first words out of her mouth was, "I am glad we finally have a Black mentor here… Damn"

We both laughed, and I asked "Wait, you never had a Black mentor here?"

She responded, "Yeah of course, we had white, Spanish, Asian mentors, and Black mentors… but they weren't like you… you are really really Black, you talk and act like we do… like you get us, like you understand us…"

What did Unique mean by me being "really really Black?

Unique had been in the program since she was 9 years old, and had always been conflicted with the intentions of the mentors, she had felt they never understood her identity. She often found herself frustrated trying to explain her experiences dealing with racism and discrimination in her school from white teachers to a white mentor. To Unique, it was evident that there was a very clear disconnect from her white mentor. One of the obvious reasons I thought of, was that the lived experiences of the mentors were drastically different than hers. In response, the mentor would not provide any advice on how to navigate such issues, but would instead feel apologetic and move on to a topic that was less uncomfortable for the mentor to deal with.

I responded, "I know that feeling, I had that happen to me before when I was at a mentoring program back home in Tampa. It sucked. If you need any advice on anything, you can come to me, nothing too wild of course. But, just know, I got you."

She looked at me with a big smile, nodded, and we both leaned forward to hug. I squeezed her tightly to me. And as I went to release, she squeezed me even tighter for a few more seconds. When we did release, our eyes locked on each other and I lifted my head slowly letting her know that I felt what she had said. She responded, "I got you too, Nia".

I would never forget that moment. A moment of an unspoken connection of internal struggles and shared lived experiences of oppression and misunderstanding. More importantly, a moment of a creation of an unbreakable bond of love, liberation, and understanding.

At the end of the day, as the girls were leaving, each girl gave me a hug goodbye and asked if I would be returning next week.

I responded, "Of course, I got y'all."

Commentary:
Let's return to that moment I shared with Unique -- on my first day as a mentor.
Twelve year old Unique tells me in our moment: " You are really, really Black."
What did Unique mean?

Let's unpack this.
To me, I understood on different levels what she could mean by this. Unique was not referring to how dark my skin is. But, what Unique is really getting at is something way deeper: a way of being and authenticity, how someone chooses to be in a space and how they exist in the world, and more importantly, she is getting at one's consciousness of their identity. Unique has revealed the ways in which youth are very aware and can analyze spaces and people in such deep ways. In society, youth are discredited for such skills, but Unique is a strong case for how absolutely brilliant youth are.

Let's play back what Unique says:

"... we had white, Spanish, Asian mentors, and Black mentors… but they weren't like you… you are really, really Black, you talk and act like we do… like you get us, like you understand us…"

It is very clear that Unique has been exposed to both white mentors and mentors of color while in AKOG. But, what she is really suggesting, that while this representation truly matters, disconnects can still be created with the mentors of color much similar to how it can occur with white mentors. In Unique's quick reflection and analysis, she presents a deeper issues and reality of the program: While racial representation matters and is necessary, but more importantly, it is how a mentor comes and what they bring forth (consciousness, equitable support, and understanding) into the space matters more. While I knew the issues of the program prior to my participation as a mentor, Unique's moment with me definitely ignited the flame. It fueled this internal drive in me to seek deeper involvement in AKOG that would give me the power to enact necessary changes. To me, this meant stepping out of my role as a mentor, and applying for a leadership position.

I needed power to make change.

The Problem.

At an Historically White College/University (HWCU) or Predominantly White Institution (PWI) such as Clark University, hosting mentoring programs -- like All Kinds of Girls (AKOG) that serve the surrounding urban neighborhood youth -- can create problematic issues of "white-savior" complexes and allow immense cultural disconnections to enter such spaces. College students who choose to engage in such community work, often come from various spaces of power and privilege quite different from urban youth. This often creates tensions around "saving and fixing these poor, broken youth" that produce or reinforce white-savior complexes and amplify cultural disconnections. While institutions and their students may be well-intentioned, this type of problematic relationship with urban youth can result in what has

been called "poverty pimping". In the article, "The Poverty Pimpin' Project," authors Cann & McCloskey (2017) focus on how a white tutoring project profits from Black and Brown bodies through celebrating their successes rather than acknowledging and addressing how the tutors were ill-equipped to work with the population. "Colleges have been accused of being 'poverty pimps,' using the surrounding community as 'pockets of needs, laboratories for experimentation, or passive recipients of expertise'" (p. 84). This unequal ("fixing the broken") relationship between the institution and the neighborhood turns out to benefit the institution greatly ("positive" community engagement reputation that is advertised at admissions and the institution's students being temporarily involved because they need volunteer hours and an appealing resume) while it actually is fundamentally exploitative in nature and often quite harmful to the youth.

All Kinds of Girls (AKOG) hosted at Clark University is not unique; tensions around whiteness, power, and privilege have manifested themselves for over 20 years in AKOG. These tensions can be seen in the ways in which predominantly white mentors interact and support their predominantly urban mentees of color. More importantly, these tensions affect the way that these mentors view the girls, their brilliance, and the unique identities and forms of cultural wealth or capital[3] they bring to the space that deserve to be accepted and highlighted. In addition, Mentors often view some of the girls' struggles in life as extreme deficits (such as challenges with learning English, low socioeconomic household, the awful stigmas of their neighborhood, and their ethnic-racial- cultural backgrounds that makes them inherently inferior), inciting the desire to "fix" them.

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[3] Tara J. Yosso (2005) "conceptualizes community cultural wealth as a critical race theory (CRT) challenge to traditional interpretations of cultural capital. CRT shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages, and instead focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged. Various forms of capital nurtured through cultural wealth include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. These forms of capital draw on the knowledges Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom. This CRT approach to education involves a commitment to develop schools that acknowledge the multiple strengths of Communities of Color in order to serve a larger purpose of struggle toward social and racial justice" (p. 69) I find this framing far more powerful than a traditional notion of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1977) as it specifies a number of different kinds of capital, giving you more kinds of strength, competence, and assets to look for.

All of this fuels the existence of problematic mentorship that has prevailed in AKOG for over twenty years. Through my research, I have come to understand that this is largely connected to Whiteness and white-savior complexes that exist and derive from the lack of critical consciousness of one's own race, power, and privilege within the space. This all then lends itself to the cultural disconnects that are experienced in the mentor-mentee relationships. These problems that have existed in AKOG since its start have perpetuated the dangerous cycle of an institutional poverty pimping relationship that I sought to fix through my project.

Let's Unpack Together: Understanding Terms and Context (A.K.A. Conceptual Framework and Lenses)

Hi again. So to me, this section is quite important and necessary. Imagine this moment:

You are reading a long academic paper, you pause on a term that you have never heard once in your life. You continue to read, in hopes that the writer thought of you at that exact moment when writing the term, and in the next sentence, the writer would provide a helpful definition.

But they didn't. You feel hurt, don't you?

Of course you don't. But, what the writer did do is make you abruptly stop reading and question your own knowledge and intellect. You then search the term in Google, read the definition, and then further process it in the context of what you had just read. You return to reading, only to find that there is several more terms that you have no knowledge of. So more Googling for you, or you could just stop reading.

For my paper, I want you to stop reading. Yeah I really do. I want you to stop and reflect. I want you to stop and ask questions. I want you to stop and think critically about the world around you.

This is why this section matters. As one of my Community, Youth, and Education Colleagues, Linda Mindaye, so beautifully states in light of the use of her own unique specific terms connected to her project's context:

> *In order to avoid things getting lost in translation or any misinterpretations about this research, the following page defines words I have deemed essential to understanding this work in its specific context. The definitions provided are ones to keep in mind and refer back to when you see these words appear in the text. When studying groups that have been historically marginalized it is important to make sure that the language used to describe our lived experiences are intentional and come from us in hopes of not also perpetuating the same systems.* (Mindaye, 2019)

Whiteness (Problem)

This is a term that I use quite frequently throughout my paper, for a very important reason. I do want readers to understand that this term in its true nature is VERY connected to the racial identity of being white, in addition to the privileges and dominance in society that exists from it. Now in light of my own project, whiteness is a term that is often defined and used in academia that extends far beyond racial identity, rather it lends itself to one's consciousness and even social mobility.

In defining "Whiteness," I draw on Ruth Frankenberg's work in *'White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness* (1993). Frankenberg presents whiteness through a socio-cultural lense: "...A dominant cultural space with enormous political significance, with the purpose to keep others on the margin....white people are not required to explain to others how 'white' culture works, because 'white' culture is the dominant culture that sets the norms. Everybody else is then compared to that norm....In times of perceived threat, the normative group may well attempt to reassert its normativity by asserting elements of its cultural practice more explicitly and exclusively" (Frankenberg, 1993, pp. 21). This helps explain how Whiteness can be can permeate a space, and even be carried by people of color, in enacting normalized

practices.   Well meaning whites and people of color who carry this Whiteness by living in this society don't often see how complicit we all are.

I also find Carol Tator's and Frances Henry's work in *Racism in the Canadian University: Demanding Social Justice, Inclusion, and Equity'* to be helpful in stressing the social and normative nature of "Whiteness" as socio-political and culture behavior.   They discuss whiteness in the following way:

> 'Whiteness,' like 'colour' and 'Blackness,' are essentially social constructs applied
> to human beings rather than veritable truths that have universal validity. The power
> of Whiteness, however, is manifested by the ways in which racialized Whiteness
> becomes transformed into social, political,   economic, and cultural behaviour.
> White culture, norms, and values in all these areas become normative natural. They
> become the standard   against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are
> measured and usually found to be inferior (Henry & Tator, 2009, pp. 46-47).

The CARED Collective, out of the Calgary Anti-Racism Education, (http://www.aclrc.com/whiteness) have done much of their work around Whiteness in hopes of educating others on the broad term. They view Whiteness as a "powerful social construction with very real, tangible, violent effects." They have broken whiteness down by a number of features (included below).   I find this to be quite helpful in unpacking and studying Whiteness in the context of AKOG and my project:

Key Features of Whiteness

Whiteness is multidimensional, complex, systemic and systematic:

- It is **socially and politically constructed**, and therefore a learned behavior
- It does not just refer to skin colour but is **ideology** based on beliefs, values behaviors, habits and attitudes, which result in the unequal distribution of power and privilege based on skin colour (Frye, 1983; Kivel, 1996)
- It represents a **position of power** where the power holder defines the categories, which means that the power holder decides who is white and who is not (Frye, 1983)
- It is **relational**. "White" only exists in relation/opposition to other categories/locations in the racial hierarchy produced by whiteness. In defining 'others,' whiteness defines itself.
- It is **fluid** - who is considered white changes over time (Kivel, 1996)
- It is a **state of unconsciousness**: whiteness is often invisible to white people, and this perpetuates a lack of knowledge or understanding of difference which is a root cause of oppression (hooks, 1994)
- It shapes how white people view themselves and others, and places white people in **a place of structural advantage** where white cultural norms and practices go unnamed and unquestioned (Frankenberg, 1993). Cultural racism is founded in the belief that "whiteness is considered to be the universal . . . and allows one to think and speak as if Whiteness described and defined the world." (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 327)

White versus Whiteness

- race is scientifically insignificant.
- race is a socially constructed category that powerfully attaches meaning to perceptions of skin colour; inequitable social/economic relations are structured and reproduced (including the meanings attached to skin colour...) through notions of race, class, gender, and nation.
- whiteness is a set of normative privileges granted to white-skinned individuals and groups; it is normalized in its production/maintenance for those of that group such that its operations are 'invisible' to those privileged by it (but not to those oppressed/disadvantaged by it); it has a long history in European imperialism and epistemologies (for those who are of mixed ancestry and 'pass' as white, this normativity, I would assume, would not occur).
- distinct but not separate from ideologies and material manifestations of ideologies of class, nation, gender, sexuality, and ability.
- the meaning of 'whiteness' is historical and has shifted over time (ie Irish, southern European peoples-Italian, Spanish, Greek; have at times been 'raced' as non-white).

(Alberta Civil Liberties Research Center -- http://www.aclrc.com/whiteness)

To me, Whiteness can be a part one's own consciousness and can affect the way you view the world and society. I do believe that all white people intrinsically and inevitably carry around this sort of consciousness. While they can work towards unpacking and unlearning this sort of consciousness through education, and through the active awareness of injustices and the systems at play in society that keep certain communities marginalized, nonetheless some form of Whiteness will still remain as their existence of being a white person can never change. So do the privileges and benefits that come from being white. But, I also do believe non-white people can carry around Whiteness within their own consciousness. I have witnessed being around people of color who do not believe that they have been disadvantaged because of their race (most likely do not want to understand this because of ignorance and "blinders") and cannot name an

experience of injustice. I believe this can stem from numerous reasons: their upbringing, white-washing (whereby they are taught to assimilate to the dominant white western culture), their their education, and their socio-economic class status and experiences of financial privilege.

White Savior Complex (Problem)

Dr. Chris Emdin, associate professor at Columbia University's Teachers College and author of *"For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood … and the Rest of Y'all Too,"* in a PBS interview, discussed the white-savior complex within the context of teaching;

" I criticize the 'white hero teacher' concept as an archaic approach that sets up teachers to fail and further marginalizes poor and minority children in urban centers...I think framing this hero teacher narrative, particularly for folks who are not from these communities, is problematic. The model of a hero going to save this savage other is a piece of a narrative that we can trace back to colonialism; it isn't just relegated to teaching and learning. It's a historical narrative and that's why it still exists because, in many ways, it is part of the bones of America. It is part of the structure of this country. And unless we come to grips with the fact that even in our collective American history that's problematic, we're going to keep reinforcing it. Not only are we setting the kids up to fail and the educators up to fail, but most importantly, we are creating a societal model that positions young people as unable to be saved... I always say, if you're coming into a place to save somebody then you've already lost because young people don't need saving. They have brilliance, it's just on their own terms. Once we get the narrative shifted then every teacher can be effective, including white folks who teach in the hood."

(https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/what-white-folks-who-teach-in-the-hood-get-wrong-about-education)

Educators, youth workers, mentors -- can't go into spaces with youth with these unexamined assumptions without doing real harm. Youth have a sixth sense and know when these folks are not there with authentic belief in them. It's a facade, a fake act. This hero act or narrative is an act of self-congratulation.   These "saviors" use the kids to feel good about themselves. It's self-defeating, and in the end, no one is well served. In AKOG, out goal was to shift the narrative.

Cultural Disconnects (Problem)

In a report on "Cultural Identity and Schooling," as part of the National Institute for Urban School Improvement at Arizona State University "On Point Series," White, Zion, and Kozleski (2005) discuss the notion of "cultural disconnects" as something that is pervasive in urban schools:

> Cultural disconnects can occur when individuals from different cultures interact. Schools in which the cultural backgrounds of teachers differ significantly from their students because of ethnic, racial, linguistic, social, religious, or economic reasons are especially vulnerable to cultural disconnects…
>
> (http://www.niusileadscape.org/docs/FINAL_PRODUCTS/NIUSI/toolkit_cd/4%20%20Implementing%20Change/OnPoints/OP_cultural_identity.pdf, p. 3)

In AKOG, though not a classroom or a school, these cultural disconnects occurred regularly and pervasively. It's natural for people to feel that "their way" of doing things makes sense, is normal, but in the context of a racist society, normal is going to do harm.

In the Teaching Tolerance Newsletter (https://www.tolerance.org/culture-classroom), Willis Hawley, Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Melissa Landa write about instruments and a framework for activities to advance a classroom culture that works against cultural disconnects between teachers and their students. I use their discussion in the context of the effects that Whiteness, white savior complexes, and a lack of critical consciousness could have on the mentor-mentee relationship in AKOG:

> Most of us in the education profession are white, middle-class, monolingual-English speakers. Increasingly, the same profile does not hold true for our students. Often, when we stand before our classrooms, the faces looking back at us do not look like our own. Many of us try to bridge this difference with an embrace of color-blindness or the Golden Rule, treating others the way we would want to be treated...But the truth is: culture matters...Culture isn't just a list of holidays or shared recipes, religious traditions, or language; it is a lived experience unique to each individual...To truly engage students, we must reach out to them in ways that are culturally and linguistically responsive and appropriate, and we must examine the cultural

assumptions and stereotypes we bring into the classroom that may hinder

interconnectedness. (https://www.tolerance.org/culture-classroom)

At the end of the day, because Clark University is predominantly white, there will be more white mentors. While representation does matter, and mentors of color are critical, we need to work with white mentors so that they get support to examine the cultural assumptions they bring to table.

Critical-Consciousness (Problem and Intervention):

Paulo Freire defines critical consciousness as the ability to "intervene in reality in order to change it. (1974, p. 4)" The Newark Community Collaborative Board, inspired by Paulo Freire's book, *"Pedagogy of the oppressed"* says

> [C]ritical consciousness refers to the process by which individuals apply critical thinking skills to examine their current situations, develop a deeper understanding about their concrete reality, and devise, implement, and evaluate solutions to their problems. …[C]ritical consciousness is a key ingredient for positive behavior change. It has two components: anti-oppressive thinking and anti-oppressive action. Anti-oppressive thinking means developing a deeper understanding of structural and internalized oppression. Anti-oppressive action means collaborative efforts to overcome and dismantle structural and internalized oppression. Developing a critical awareness of systems of privilege and oppression is necessary, because without this awareness, one cannot take action. Critical thinking and the anti-oppressive thinking of critical consciousness work together, because oppression involves controlling information, and it requires uninformed thought. Without the ability to think critically, a person cannot develop anti-oppressive thinking.
>
> (http://newarkccb.org/framework/critical-consciousness-theory/)

I often use the notion of "critical consciousness" as a tool in thinking about why someone mentors the way that they do and their views of their mentees, or more specifically, why

Whiteness, white savior complexes, and cultural disconnects gets enacted in AKOG. It is heavily connected to the types of consciousness the mentors are bringing to the space. If someone is lacking critical consciousness of their own race, power and privilege within the space, they may create a problematic mentor-mentee relationship and perpetuate "the problem".

Radical Change (Result):

As defined by IGI Global Disseminator of Knowledge[4], "'Radical change' refers to change that occurs relatively fast and modifies the essence of social structures or organizational practices. Specifically, this type of change affects the resources, norms, and interpretive schemes of groups and individuals (https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/how-do-you-know-if-it-is-any-good/24444)" The change that I hope to enact through my findings from this project will bring about radical change, dismantling/decolonizing 20 years of whiteness that has taken over.

This is another term that I prefer to define. After three years being one of the two main leaders of the program, I find that the interventions that we created have resulted in libertatory practices, but have also resulted in radical changes happening to the structure and mentorship of the program. Three years, in my own personal opinion, is a short amount of time to truly see changes in an organization and/or program. So to see such positive changes happening is quite radical and beautiful. Being able to, in a larger sense, dismantle twenty years of "the problem" is truly radical.

Praxi Goals, Research Questions, and Thesis Goals

My goals for my project were born in the moment I wrote about with Unique, when I began to think of the ways I could (and had to) enact changes in the program. These goals turned into deep and critical questions that spearheaded, in Fall 2016, a set of interventions that Fatima and I thoughtfully created and implemented in the program. The goals were to create a sustainable and liberatory space for both the mentors and mentees built upon trust, love, empowerment and support, and solidarity. Fatima and I designed these interventions to provide mentors with helpful tools and liberatory practices to find more connections with their mentees, to find more ways to see the girls' brilliance. More importantly, with these interventions we hoped to push

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[4] https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/how-do-you-know-if-it-is-any-good/24444

mentors to be critically-conscious about their power, privilege and identities within this space, and hopefully beyond. Through the process of implementing interventions, we expected to see both the struggles and successes mentors experienced.

These goals led me to ask the three core questions that guided my research, and led to my findings (the analysis and journeys that I describe later).

Question One:
How did we get here? What led us to this point? What motivated the interventions?

Question Two: What happened? What can we learn from the journeys of several focal mentors and girls that help make sense of AKOG, and its development (evolvement) as a program?

Sub-Questions:
- What are the ways both mentors and mentees feel disconnects that are often associated with/rooted in differences in power and privilege?
- How are these disconnects manifested and enacted through the mentor-mentee relationship?
- What are the cultural and socio-economic roots of these disconnects between the mentors and mentees?

Question Three: What are the implications, the lessons learned for AKOG in the future (with new leadership) and for other community-based programs run at predominantly white institutions?

Sub-questions:
- How can mentors break down and unpack the disconnects they experience with their mentees from varying different backgrounds than them?
- How does breaking down these disconnects create mentorship that is not harmful to their mentees?
- What kind of interventions (trainings, dialogues, support, etc) designed to lead to liberatory practice are most beneficial to deconstruct these disconnects and Whiteness that arise in the program?
- How do you maintain and sustain an urban youth program hosted at a PWI, and/or predominately white led, that understands and challenges these disconnects to support mentor-mentee relationships that is based in solidarity and liberation for both?

In this thesis, I hope to present the growth and process of AKOG as a program that was created and run by predominantly white women before Fall 2016, and then over time, led by 2 women of color, committed to radical change in our recruitment and support/mentoring of the mentors. We planned to address the problematic issues in the program -- problematic ideologies/ biases/ savior-complexes and lack of seeing the brilliance of the girls that was being brought and enacted in the space of AKOG -- in the form of what we called: Interventions. In documenting these strategic interventions and their impact on All Kinds of Girls, my hope is that this combination of praxis and research can benefit other urban-youth programs that are dealing with issues such as:

- *Lack of representation among identities, backgrounds and diversity amongst youth workers.*
- *White-saviour complexes, in which there is a the desire of wanting to "fix" the marginalized youth in the consciousness of youth workers.*
- *Lack of critical-consciousness of identity, power and privilege in the urban-youth space that create cultural disconnects.*

I call this praxis project/thesis AKOG's evolvement, "The Journey." As will be seen, there were many twist and turns, constant bumps along the way, missed exits, yet, we still made it to some of our "destinations." The reality is that this project's journey will never end. While we made it to some of our destinations, we are awaiting our arrival to most.

The work has evolved and progressed in such great ways, but isn't finished...

**Chapter 2: Ethnographic Background — Description and History of AKOG**

AKOG Logo, 2000.

AKOG was started in 1998 by Clark's Department of Women's Studies "...in response to a community desire to create a space where generations of females could foster positive growth through mentorship and openly explore their personal and political identities."[5] It is led and run by undergraduate female-identifying women, serving as supporting mentors. The program is a free (providing free lunches, activities and field trips, t-shirts, etc), Saturday-based for girls ages 9-16 in Worcester, MA, in which majority of the girls come from the Main South neighborhood. Here is the current mission statement: "The program aims to support girls in developing a solid sense of self while simultaneously fostering their role as important and powerful contributors to the formation of the evolving social world through empowering mentorship."

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[5] https://www2.clarku.edu/departments/womensstudies/akog/

In fall 2015, Fatima and I, while serving in the role as mentors, saw the major issues around the power dynamics of the 90% white mentor population working with predominantly mentees of color from various socio-cultural backgrounds.. Race or ones color of skin is not the issue, but it is the problematic ideologies/ biases/ savior-complexes and lack of seeing the brilliance of the girls that was being brought and enacted in the space of AKOG. To me, this ultimately affected the potential of mutual beneficial mentor-mentee relationships that lacked authenticity and understanding. In Spring of 2016, Fatima and I were both promoted as leaders of the program, as Mentor and Administrative Coordinators.

Since Spring 2016, my first year as a program leader, we have had about 70 girls attend the program each year, along with about 30 to 40 female undergraduate mentors. Mentees are separated by age cohorts. In which, the younger girls cohort with the ages 9 through 12, and are placed in their age groups as a mini-group with age-appropriate designed mentorship and activities. The older girls cohort ages 13 through 16, in which they are group as the 'Teen Circle' and are more dialogue based activities on topics the girls want to discuss . Registration forms for the girls are dispersed in some of public schools throughout different areas of Worcester, in which families are able to register girls at anytime, as it is drop-in program. Mentors can apply to be mentors at the start of the school year, in September, with a full year commitment to the program. The program is supervised by a faculty advisor, but is mainly led by another set of undergraduate women, the Steering Committee. This group meets during the week before the Saturday to discuss the logistics (behind-the-scenes work) of the program. Here is how the Steering Committee and its branches are structured:
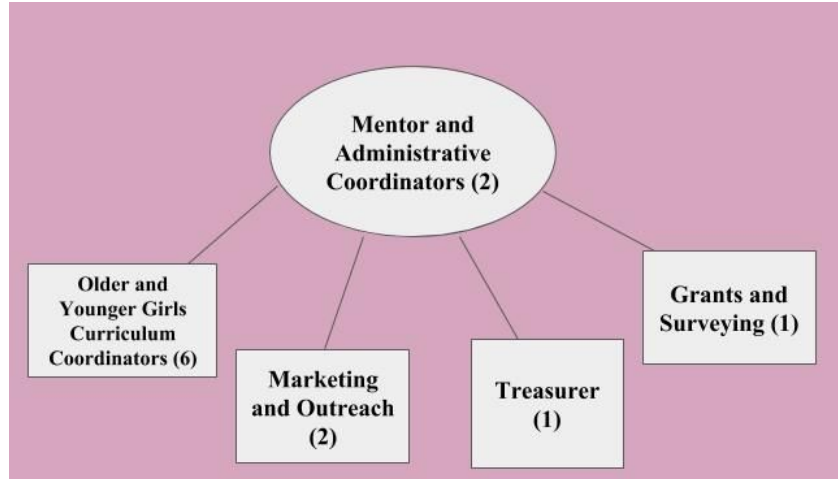
AKOG meets for 15 to 17 weeks during the Clark school year (except for Clark and Worcester Public Schools breaks). AKOG begins in October and typically ends in early to mid April. Each week, activities are planned around a theme. Sample themes include: Culture Day, Celebrating our Differences and Similarities Day, Herstory Day, and Team Building Day. "Each theme is designed to invite girls to explore their own identity, to examine their relationships with themselves and other girls, and to help them to become stronger, more active and knowledgeable members of society." Here is the program's typical schedule:

Typical Saturday*

9:50-10:00 Mentors arrive

10:00-11:00 Mentors go over schedule for day/ Assist with set up/ Energizing games

11:00-11:30 Girls arrive, journaling and group discussions

11:30-12:30 Introduction to day, activities start for the girls

12:30-1:00 Lunch

1:00-2:00   Remaining   activities   and   larger   close   out/debrief

2:00-2:30 Clean up/ Girls check-out

2:30-3:00 Mentor debrief and closing activities

Before Fall 2018, AKOG was fully funded by the United Way of Central Massachusetts' Women's Initiative, but funding was dropped (with no warning) with little to no reason or justification. During the summer of 2018, it was a long journey of trying to seek funds through grants. There was a truly strong fear among the leadership that we might have to make a tough decision to end the program because our funding efforts just kept hitting dead ends. It was at the start of the fall semester of 2018, right before we thought out of desperation that we needed to end the program, that AKOG received a generous grant from Clark's Student Council after they heard of our struggles.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Epistemological Stance

In doing both change work in the world and research on that work, I have had to ask myself what counts as knowing something and how do I think I can make claims about the world and about my work. Who we are and how we move in the world/how we make sense of it affects the "truth" and our knowledge. Our lived experiences can never quite equate to what you learn from a book. Reading about being an urban youth versus being an urban youth are two different ways of experiencing. This guides me to take an interpretive stance in my research, mindful of my own positionality and that of others. I cannot be a "disinterested" or so-called objective researcher.

My Approach: Critical Ethnography

The approach I've taken in my research is ethnographic (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, Heath & Street, 2009) -- that is, I am both a participant and an observer of what is going on in AKOG. I am trying to make sense out of the complexities that are AKOG -- the history, the journey (or "evolvement"), my place in this program, the mentors, the girls, the multiplicity of interactions on our Saturdays, and the change, growth, and impact on each and every one of us. I participate

(before, during, after, behind the scenes and on center state, behind the video camera, dancing with the girls, planning, debriefing, reflecting). And all the while, I observe -- I look through my many lenses (some I'm fully aware of and others not) at what is happening, what I'm saying and doing, and what others are saying and doing. And then I reflect, journal, and talk with Fatima, and the other AKOG mentors and my CYES colleagues and friends, and write and reflect, and review videos and audio recordings, and interview and transcribe and reflect some more.   I reflect on each Saturday and plan for the next.   Through this iterative cycle of observant participation and participant observation, I hope to shed light on my interventions as a leader in AKOG, trying to promote change (to decolonize Whiteness) in this program. Observing, acting, building relationships, interviewing, slowing down to re-see and re-hear my recordings are my ways of making sense, as well as ways of getting other people to think (I ask questions, I provoke, I write journal entries on my struggles and high points, on puzzling moments, I interrogate my lenses and consider what it means to be the agent of change as well as the observer, and as someone who is changing and growing as well). I am both an insider and an outsider looking in.

… I am always in the thick of my work, I can never seem to step out of it. This type of work is who I am, it is a reflection of my life….

……...

But in addition to doing traditional ethnography, I see myself as engaging in "critical ethnography" as a researcher (Carspecken, 1998). I focus on critical consciousness — the ability to recognize one's own positions of privilege and analyze systems of inequality and then have a commitment to take action against these systems.

As mentioned earlier, Paulo Freire defines critical consciousness as the ability to "intervene in reality in order to change it" (1974/2005, p. 4). Critical consciousness proceeds through the identification of "generative themes", which Freire identifies as "iconic representations that have

a powerful emotional impact in the daily lives of learners."(Freire, P. (2005) Education for Critical Consciousness. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.)

Lenses

As my work has developed, I have drawn on several constructs (see the section above on Unpacking Terms) which I use as key lenses as I make sense of my data.

Critical Consciousness and Whiteness:

A most important aspect of work based research is the researcher's situatedness and context. Within this, the unique perspective of the researcher inevitably makes a difference to the research. An understanding of the critique of insider research, along with the specific issues that often arise for insiders, such as the need for sensitivity towards colleagues when undertaking research, appears in this chapter. The development of the self and the potential impact that insider research can have in a particular organization or professional sphere are emphasized.

My experience of being an urban youth in a mentoring program… seeing the harmful effects of well-intentioned mentorship with poor execution of consciousness… not wanting to research and create my work into some sort of lab...

(https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/32890_Costley_Chap1.pdf)

Jackson Heights in 'Suitcase City' in Tampa. "Forced Relocation due to Gentrification"[6]

Data Sources, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

My data sources include surveys (pre-, during, and final -- for both mentors and the girls), the girls' and mentors' journal reflections, one-on-one interviews (which most times occurred during the program), and my own journaling I did outside the space.

My approach to this research was to make it as "non-researchy" as possible. I often felt this discomfort with the idea of researching on the mentors and mentees I learned to love and to care so deeply for. It just didn't feel right.

Interviews:

> For each mentors and mentees, I began with questions centered around their identity and sort of their own life story, this to me would highlight the foundation and creation of their

[6]https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/city-council-asking-housing-authority-to-give-residents-at-tampa-park-apartments-more-time-to-leave

consciousness. This provided the "why" to who they are in the world and what shaped them.

For mentors, I would then lead to questions around what brought them to Clark. How does their identities play into the spaces they choose to occupy while in college, specifically to a space such as AKOG? This would then lead down the path of deeper questions that would push them to be vulnerable and honest about themselves and their own critical consciousness within the space: Had they ever enacted acts of whiteness and savior-complexes in their mentorship? Had they experienced cultural disconnects with their mentees and how? In answering these questions, I would ask for them to name those experiences specifically-- Who? What? Where? When? How? I would finally conclude the interview, with questions around their thoughts of their own involvement within the program, specifically had they been personally affected by the interventions created? Did they feel like they benefited from them? Which ones were beneficial, and which ones were less beneficial? Did they see change in AKOG, if so, in what ways? What were their thoughts on Fatima and I's leadership?

As for the mentees, I wanted their interviews to highlight their honest experiences of being in the programs and the changes they witnessed. I wanted to gain an understanding of how these changes affected their relationships with their mentors. Their interviews were typically shorter and less pushing in asking "deep" questions, as I was very cognisant of taking them away from their experience of enjoying the program day.

For all of my interviews, I never began with pre-written questions for each participant, as I wanted the interviews to flow like a conversation and create a dialogue. More importantly, I wanted to create a space for vulnerabilities and truths to be shared. As the audio recorder was on, I would write down the times in which were key "ah-hah" and "wow" moments in my journal for me to reflect back on when listening and transcribing

Focal Participants & The Others:

I chose six focal participants journeys that shed a great light on the bigger picture of AKOG's evolvement… while I do focus on these particular participants, there are over 70 mentees and 30 mentors. I want to some knit their own journeys into the bigger picture of AKOG's growth and evolvement.

In this section of the chapter, I want to quickly highlight the focal participants in my project. While I will include others that participated in a later chapter, I chose to highlight six particular participants: four mentors and two mentees. I chose them because each of their individual journeys in AKOG have different and unique elements that speak quite significantly to the bigger picture: AKOG's journey over the last three years.

Fatima (Co-Leader & Mentor):

Fatima (Mentor), Spring 2016.

Fatima is a Chicana woman, from Watsonville, California, raised by Mexican immigrants within a mainly Latinx- agricultural community. Like myself, Fatima grew up around people much like herself, which made coming to a PWI like Clark quite a culture shock and adjustment was difficult . She began as mentor in AKOG in fall 2015, and in Spring 2016, was promoted to Mentor and Administrative coordinator alongside me. Her journey highlights the struggles and successes of being a co-leader in a program that she holds so dear to her heart. While we shared the same role, her experiences are quite different than mine, which makes her perspective quite valuable for this project.

Sara (Mentor), Fall 2018.

Sara[7] (Mentor):

Sara is a white woman from Marlborough, Massachusetts. She is in the same class year as Fatima and I, and even began as mentor in the program at the same time in Fall of 2015. I always seen Sara as one of the very few white women who seemed to "get it", in

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[7] Whenever I refer to an AKOG mentor or mentee by name, I use a pseudonym to honor their privacy, except in one case. Fatima, a focal participant and a co-leader of AKOG asked that her real name be used.

which we will get into in her journey. Her journey highlights how not all mentors, no matter their race, always come into the program lacking awareness and complete critical- consciousness of themselves. Sara's journey sheds light on the idea that some mentors may come with a sense of critical-consciousness, but just need a little bit of pushing (planting seeds, as I call) to do the work of gaining more of this consciousness. In addition, she shows how some mentors can come with good intentions to support their mentees, but there will always be struggles that come out of this intentionality due to whiteness.

Jessica and Alexa (Mentors)[8]:

Jessica and Alexa both have unique journeys that definitely connect and have parallels. Jessica and Alexa are both white women that were raised in Brooklyn, New York, in a pretty gentrified neighborhood in Brooklyn. Jessica is two years older than Alexa, in which I see a lot of Jessica's beginnings as a mentor in the program much similar to that of Alexa's. After one semester of being a mentor in Fall 2016, Jessica is promoted to Treasurer in Steering Committee. This role required her to be even more involved in the program than she was as a mentor, in which I feel that this ultimately pushed her to be challenged to evolve in her critical consciousness. Part of this evolvement was a result of the interventions and gaining a leadership role. As for Alexa, she began as a mentor in Fall 2018, where she presents herself as "getting it" and "woke", but I find this presentation to be a bit off. I do see glimpses of change of consciousness due to interventions and her involvement in the program, in which I see her almost following in the footsteps of Juliette.

Unique and Ariana (Mentees):

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[8] Jessica and Alexa, in order to honor their privacy, I have decided to not include photographs of them.

I have the strongest bond with two particular mentees, Unique and Ariana. They were both in the program when I began as a mentor, and have seen the journey and changes of AKOG over the last couple of years. Both are born and raised in Worcester, Massachusetts in the Main South neighborhood. Unique is a Black girl with Latinx influences, and Ariana is a mix of her Latinx backgrounds. Both of their journeys as mentees highlight their views of the changes of AKOG and how they both personally evolved from these changes.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis & Findings

How Did We Get Here?: Interventions & My Leadership Journey.

In this subsection, I want to lay out my leadership journey while highlighting how certain interventions came to be. I structure this journey by years, as each year brought forth both great struggles and successes.

I really want this section to be a place of vulnerability and truths. My path to gaining this sort of power that would allow me to enact change was not easy. There was initial pushback, frustrations, and constant doubts about myself and if could I really do this. I sometimes wanted to call it quits because as I gained power through my role, this work became intensely personal.

I learned in my first couple of months of being a leader, that I loved it too much, maybe a bit too much a times. There were numerous nights, I would lay in my bed with streams of endless thoughts of am I doing enough to make change...

2015 "The Beginning"	2016 "The New Leaders & Enacting Change"	2017 "In The Midst of Changes & Riding The Wave"	2018 "The Fight"
-Fatima and I begin as mentors (Fall 2015) -in which we recognize the issues with the program: • Structural issues • lack of diversity and representation amongst leadership and mentors • lack of critical-consciousness with mentors • cultural disconnects, and the lack of seeing the brilliance of the girls.	-Fatima and I are promoted to the core leadership role: Mentor and Administrative Coordinators -The summer of Fall 2016, before our Sophomore year, we had began to create program "interventions": • Change of structure (screening process for mentors-- application and interviews) • Intentional and intense trainings and social bondings to create connections with mentors. • In turn, this would intervene and prevent issues that existed before our leadership.	-Fatima goes abroad, in which places me as the sole core leader in the space. She could only assist with logistical things that could be handled afar. -This year we got to see the fruits of our labor: • Increased representation of mentors of color (outreach to POC spaces on campus) • The trainings were spaces not only of learning and unpacking of consciousness, but a space to create sisterhoods that enhanced mentorship. -When Fatima returns (spring 2018), this was our best training and received great responses from mentors.	-In our final year as leaders, Fatima and I find in the summer of 2018 that the program lost its sole funding of $12,000 from Women's Initiative (United Way) -Fatima, Jessica, and I fight and seek out funder from our institution and through grants. After a long summer of battle between funders, we received half our funding from Clark's Student Council. We could have lost the program, but the love and passion we have for it won. The program continues after doubts from so many. **2019** *"Giving The Baby Away"* -Fatima and I, in our final semester as leaders, have to truly come to terms with: How do we give our precious baby, AKOG, away?

All Kind of Girls Mentors, 2014-2015.

The New Leaders & Enacting Change (2016).

"You know there has never been a women of color in leadership at AKOG?"

One of the senior women in the Steering Committee shared this with me when I told her I thought about applying for the Mentor Coordinator role. As a freshman mentor in the program, I already felt in a sense the possibility that other steering committee members would see my application and think, "She not ready for this role, this is only her first semester as only a mentor!"

But shockingly, the Mentor Coordinator at the time had shared that she thought I would be the perfect fit for the role. This definitely came as a surprise to me, as I often received mixed perceptions from the all-white leadership.

She shares, "Yeah a lot of us in Steering Committee actually hope that you and Fatima will apply for the role! The girls love you both a lot and always talk about you! We also notice how mentors often come to you both for advice when handling issues with the girls. You both are just natural leaders…"

Let's translate what she was really saying: Fatima and I were the only mentors of color that the girls really connected with, as they only felt comfortable talking to us about personal issues. Fatima worked with the younger mentee cohort, whereas I worked with the older girls cohort. Even beyond discussing out personal things, the girls just simply loved being around us and we loved being around them. They reminded us so much of our own younger selves, and the girls definitely felt that connection. Funny thing I learned years later was that Fatima and I was placed top on the girls collective list of their favorite mentors, which wasn't that many.

Whenever mentors had issues with their mentees, especially regarding more uncomfortable topics like discrimination and racism they faced in their community, they would often bring them to us. The sad part about this is that they would leave after dropping the girls with us, most times while we were in the midst of working with a group of mentees already. Oh no they wouldn't stay to assist in the conversation, they would drop the girls off, in which they would join the rest of the mentors in conversations about more comfortable topics suited to them. This highlights the apparent disconnect between those mentors and the girls, in which the girls felt deeply and understood.

Fatima and I applied for dual Mentor and Administrative Coordinator roles. The application and interview process was fairly easy and low stakes. To me, this was quite surprising as this leadership role is quite central to the functionality of the program. It was just way too easy.

The next day, after our interviews, Fatima and I found out we were promoted to our new leadership position. Fatima and I happened to bump into each other that day we heard the news. I'd never really seen Fatima outside the AKOG space, so her seeing that day came to me as shock, but also the beginning of our sisterhood in leadership.

As I walked out of the library, Fatima was entering. We exchanged smiles, and we both -- strangely at the same time -- came in for a hug.

"I am excited to be on this new journey with you, Nia" Fatima said.
"Me too, Fatima. We got a lot of work ahead though…" I responded.

Fatima and I were not fully welcomed with open arms into the Steering Committee group. That week before we were invited to their next meeting, we had met up and started to brainstorm ideas of what would come from our dual leadership: interventions. When we came to the meeting, we were so excited to share with the others, but were met with resistance from two senior white leadership members. These two in particular, in our opinion, never quite cared for us as they would often urge mentees to hangout with other mentors than us, because "it hurt the other mentors feelings". You mean, the same mentors who only committed to a semester because they needed to fulfill community engagement volunteer hours? Or do you mean the same mentors who would tell Fatima and I that they felt uncomfortable with girls who talk to them about their personal issues with them?

As the first women of color in Steering Committee, we knew that the beginning of this journey would not be easy. And it wasn't. The white women felt we were moving too fast to just be starting our roles, and that our ideas would make AKOG less inclusive…. WHAT?

I'm gonna fast forward, because we all know that had Fatima and I believed what these two leadership members with their problematic thoughts of change, then this paper would not exist.

As women of color, and as leaders who planned to lead with love to evolve this program, we knew our ideas needed to happen fast and to be truly intentional.

Summer of 2016 was filled with Fatima and I going back on forth on Facetime to figure out what change looked like for the both of us. While Fatima was three hours behind in California, we always found a consistent time each week to chat.

Before we would begin the planning part of our meeting, we would start with:

"How are you sister?"

We would spend time chatting about personal things and our individuals weeks' happenings in our part of the world.

After checking in first, we would dive into planning interventions.

"... I don't want to discredit the white women and their mentorship, but how we are we going to help them get it?..." I would always say to Fatima.

"...Well, we know the issues doesn't lie only with white mentors, because you and I both know there was some problematic mentors of color who come from more privileged backgrounds… because of how they are raised, they have blinders to the truths of the world…" Fatima would remind me.

"So the problem isn't white mentors… the problem is whiteness and consciousness." I would respond, coming to the realization of the true problem that existed.

"The New Leaders & Enacting Change" (2016)

The summer of Fall 2016, before our Sophomore year, we had began to create program "interventions":
- Change of structure (screening process for mentors-- application and interviews)

- Outreach to women of color on campus; changing the rhetoric that program only supports and is exclusive to white mentors, we support all types of women that want to mentos (creating a more inclusive mentor pool= inclusive program and type of mentorship for the girls.)

- The creation of "Is AKOG For Me?" workshop, which allowed female students with an opportunity to gain more insight about the program, its structure, scenarios, and their role/why it matters.

- Intentional and intense trainings along with social bondings to create connections amongst mentors which helps with building connections with girls. Trainings consisted of deep and honest dialogues around community stigmas, our biases, power and privilege, and identity. Community members and previous girls are invited to give mentors more insight. Set the tone for the collective vision between leadership and mentors that we are here to love, support and empower not only the girls, but each other.

- In turn, the hope and purpose of the changes would prevent issues that existed before our leadership to no longer persist..

In The Midst Of Changes (2017)

All Kinds of Girls Mentors, 2017-2018.

This year we truly got to see the fruits of our labors in the midst of all the changes we created. At the the beginning of the 2017-18 school year, there were 11 mentors of color

in AKOG, whereas in 2015 it was only 3 mentors of color, and 2016 we had 6 mentors of color.

How people spoke and felt about All Kinds of Girls was changing. The rhetoric around the program being this white women exclusive space and the issues around that switched to the inclusivity of the space and the love and support that radiated outside the boundaries of the program.

Mentors were sharing their positive experiences and their own personal evolvement from the program in their classes, with their family and friends, Clark faculty, and in other spaces in the community…

Fatima and I created change that was undeniable.

In Fall of 2017, Fatima leaves for her semester abroad. While she could only help with logistical things that could be handled from a distance, I was put in the position of being a lone leader and left with a great responsibility of leading the program by myself, something I was unsure I could handle.

In the beginning, I won't lie, it was tough doing what two people do as one person. Everyone seemed to look only at me for answers, and this became overwhelming. I wanted Fatima to truly enjoy her experience being abroad, so I did my best to not bother her and pushed through.

As a leader, this one of the toughest experiences… being alone. I recognized the strength that came from two women of color in power, but also had to recognize my own personal strengths as an individual leader. This was one of the greatest life lessons.

United Way Highlights AKOG for their charity event, Fall 2017.
Focal People (from left to right): Stephanie Mireku (previous mentor for AKOG, and now works as a faculty member for Clark), Dean Nadja Johnson (Dean of student for Clark), Micki Davis (Previous Faculty Adviser to AKOG and previous Director of Community Engagement), Tommie (Mentor), me, and Ariana (Mentee), and Jack Foley (Clark's Vice President of Government and Community Affairs)

In the picture above, All Kinds of Girls is being highlighted or shall I say "poverty pimped" at our previous funder, Women's Initiative of United Way's charity event. How interesting this was to be spotlighted at this event, which ultimately helped boost their own pockets through using us to present the ways they help urban youth.

Two months later after being spotlighted at the event, All Kinds of Girls loses funding from United Way with little to no reason.

They definitely pimped us, right?

All Kinds of Girls Mentors, 2018-2019.

The Fight (2018)

That whole summer after learning that we lost funding with no reason, Fatima and I received an email from our faculty adviser at the time explaining that we should probably put the program on hold for a semester until we secured funding. This was not an option for us.

We pushed United Way to give us answers so that maybe we could work on correcting issues that the saw. We received no response.

Not only did the girls depend on the program, but mentors depended on it as well. Our journey did not exist with pauses because money wasn't there… we still continue the program with or without funding… we would make it work.

Fatima, Jessica (Treasurer), and I worked long hours over the summer and at the start of the semester to secure funding through numerous applications for grants, one of them being from Clark's Student Council. We actually had one mentor and another women of color that supported the program, advocating for the need for funding for such a

necessary program. Two weeks before we planned to start the program, we received an email stating the our application for our grant through Student Council was accepted for half the funding given by United Way--$6,000.

Fatima and I sat in her room crying, because for awhile, we began to think the best option was to put the program on hold. The journey continues…

The training with the new mentors after we fought long and hard for the program was the most amazing one I had ever led. This group of mentors just felt right, as if the knew how much we fought to make this program happen. They all came ready to learn, to share, to unpack, and to love...

Giving Away Our Baby (2019)

Fatima and I had began to come to terms with the fact that this would be our last semester as leaders of the program. But, it truly did not hit us…

Had we held the baby too close, too close that were unable to fully give it away? How do we leave this program when we do not know how to? Who do we give the baby to… to treat it and love it equally, if not more than us?

Let's dive into this later...

The Journeys (Mentors and Mentees)

Mentors

 Sara's Journey

Sara's journey highlights the ways in which interventions created allowed for transformations of mentors and their consciousness in the space, and even beyond. In Sara's case, she came into the space with a bit more awareness and a sense of critical-consciousness of her positionality than most mentors in the program. She and I began as mentors at the same time, in fall 2015, where she was one of the very few mentors that the girls gravitated to. While I had not known her personally outside of AKOG, I always felt this good energy about her-- she seemed easy to talk to, willing to learn and listen, and well-intentioned. Interviewing her allowed for me to have a unique opportunity to really get to know Sara more deeply. Our interview was a space of vulnerability and a way to share our different truths. As a white woman who could acknowledge her whiteness, her privileges, and the ways she ultimately benefits over other races is a type of vulnerability and truth I didn't think she would share with me.

In turn, I was able to share with her my own truths about my initial biases towards white people who do urban youth work-- I often questioned, "Will they ever be able to fully connect to their predominantly youth of color? I think that's impossible…" This to me stems way back to my own experience of being a youth in programs similar to AKOG. Through this work… through working with mentors like Sara… I have come to understand that there is no such thing in this world as being "fully connected" to anyone. Even within your own community of people, disconnects can be present through status, such as socio-economic class and power dynamics that exist because of it.

For me, connection is created through support and building each other up. Connection is created through understanding and diversity. Connection is created through equity and equality. Connection is created by love.

Who is Sara to this world?

When I asked Sara this question, I prefaced it by letting her know that I would not place judgment on her answers and my hope was for her to be as vulnerable as she was willing to be:

"I am a white, cis-gendered female-identifying person. Home is Marlborough, Massachusetts, where I grew up. But for me, recently, Worcester is starting to feel more like home. I had grown up in an overwhelmingly white, working class, rural community, where there were only a handful of people of color that lived in the area. I consider myself to be quite privileged--not only because the identities I listed are largely dominant in the culture that I grew up in, but also because I did not experience any major financial or emotional challenges in my home life or with my family growing up. Fortunately for me, I grew up in a pretty liberal household."

When Sara said this, I definitely paused. I hadn't experience this sort of honesty from a white person. I wrote down in my journal the time from my recorder when she said this. I wrote, "5:43, wow did she really just say that?"

I then asked her to share her own journey to college at Clark University:

" … I knew I wanted to go to school in an urban area because I grew up in a rural-suburban town that felt very homogeneous to me. Clark wasn't my first choice, like most people. I definitely arrived at Clark with preconceived notions about the Main South area. When most people heard I was going to school in Worcester, they would make a face or tell me to be careful. They might ask 'why?' incredulously. I had no experience in Worcester to refute those comments or ideas...All I knew was that Worcester had a reputation of being "uglier" than other places in Massachusetts, and people treated it as a less desirable location... My grandmother, for example, was not happy that I was coming here for school.. All the information I had about Worcester was from those types of conversations, and, unsurprisingly, I internalized all of those things before I arrived.

Many people warned me about safety, so in my first year, I wasn't comfortable walking around at night or by myself. I didn't want to venture past the general campus boundaries alone because I was scared of getting cat-called or being spoken to by strangers, especially men.

 I think that the fact that this area is home to many people of color, specifically Black people and Latinx people, did contribute to my uncertainty or fear. I had grown up in an overwhelmingly white community, and although I had been taught rationally to 'not be racist' and I had been to many cities and traveled a lot, and I had only had a very few friends who were people of color... That is, I didn't know how to interact or feel comfortable around people of color in urban areas sidewalks, public transportation, etc. or low-income areas who were going to *remain strangers.*

 I had been taught to recognize racism in myself when it occurred with a human being who I was interacting with one-on-one, but I hadn't really been taught how to recognize racism in myself in public settings. I think that's a really important distinction, especially for kids like me who are raised in liberal households but are surrounded by white people. That is definitely something living in Worcester has taught me to (start to) confront within myself."

For a white person to really recognize and speak to their own internalized or suppressed racist views, and then to share this truth with a person of color… wow, this was a powerful moment for me. I again, quickly scrambled into my journal the time from the recorder with a similar comment like before. In this moment, I thanked her for telling her truths when I knew that deep down it was hard for her to share… especially to share it with me. Sara and I definitely had a found respect for each other, but our relationship was never that deep or personal. It was always "hi and bye" or a quick chat in passing.

But within the first 8 minutes of the interview, I felt a shared connection of understanding and vulnerability.

Who is Sara to All Kinds of Girl?

Sara began AKOG as a mentor in 2015, and was one of the 90% of white mentors in the program at the time.

"I learned about AKOG from friends who participated in the program as mentors... They spoke so highly of their experiences, and I knew I wanted to get further involved on Clark's campus, so I decided to join… initially, AKOG felt fair and accepting…once I arrived, I realized that the majority of girls who attend are girls of color, while the mentors were majority white… At the end of Spring 2016, I found out that Fatima and Nia were promoted to Mentor Coordinators. I felt this sort of excitement for the program's future with them as the leaders. They were both women of color, which brought new and needed representation in the leadership of AKOG. Many of the girls loved being around them, and I often saw some mentors coming to them seeking advice on how to handle situations with the girls. They always provided such thoughtful advice or assisted the mentor with situation. I was truly excited to see what would come from their leadership. This excitement led me to ask them to participate in a podcast I created for a class, in which focused on the topic of women in leadership. In their interviews, They shared their well-thought out goals that would create necessary changes that was needed for the program...their main goal was to make All Kinds of Girls an inclusive space for both mentors and mentees...I thought that was so amazing..."

(Spring 2019) A day later, Sara sent me this clip from this podcast from Spring 2016. I was a bit shocked, because I totally forgot I had even participated in this. I was amazed

of what Fatima and I said was our goals for change in the program, and to now in the present, to see these goals become true realities is quite magical.

The next part of the interview, I really wanted her to speak more to her own personal journey in AKOG as not only a mentor in the space, but her own personal growth as an individual who extended beyond the space. She began by sharing some beginning bumps in the road of her journey as a mentor that made her question "Am I really this well-intentioned white person that I claim to be?":

"Like I said..I grew up pretty liberal… it was easy for me to accept and understand others that were different than me… I have had difficult conversations with girls about how they think being gay is gross or wrong, and those have been uncomfortable for me because many of those ideas stem from the girls' home and religious lives. It was hard to have that conversation because I disagreed, but I didn't want to lose the girls' trust and insult their families or the way they had been taught by their parents...

Another very stand out moment for me was back when I began as a mentor in Fall 2015. My mentee had came to me about racism she was experiencing from her teacher. When she began to ask for advice of how to handle it, I froze up and didn't know what to say… the other white mentors that were in earshot of the conversation, had turned their intention to something else… in that moment, she was looking for answers and I didn't have them. She just looked at me and said 'yeah, I guess you don't get it because you're white'. It broke my heart. I just didn't feel equipped to have this type of conversation …"

There were so many levels to what Sara shared in these moments of uncomfortable conversations. For me, this was a result of her whiteness that created these sort of disconnects where the support that was needed by the mentee in that moment wasn't provided. While she is frustrated with herself in this moment, she also reveals her frustrations with other white mentors that can hear the mentee. Yet they turn a blind eye.

I see Sara as a mentor who has the best intentions coming into the space, but the reality is that her identity, her positionality, and lived-experiences are of being white. In a sense, these disconnects were inevitable as her and the mentee have two very different lived experiences and walks of life. For me, I had the opportunity to see Sara engage in the work to unpack these disconnects that were created due to her whiteness. While some interventions certainly lended themselves to this unpacking of whiteness and gaining more critical-consciousness, I believe that a lot of this work started in the space, she then took it beyond the space to challenge herself.

Sara then shares how interventions and the creation of a more inclusive program helped her growth as not only a mentor, but who she is as a person and how she interacts with others in the world:

"...AKOG trainings led by Fatima and you always felt very warm… you both provided mentors with helpful tools and encouragement to be vulnerable and supportive, which is good coaching for moments when the girls say something we have to respond to sensitively… I definitely felt supported as a mentor… you both created a space not only in training, but on program days, for emotional check-ins and sharing activities, that created bonds amongst the mentors which extended to our relationships with the girls…

I have learned that not every day or every interaction with a girl will be successful or feel amazing, and that's fine. I have learned to take turns with my fellow mentors and even push them too. I have learned to be real with the girls--they can tell when you're being disingenuous...I have learned how to encourage others to step into the limelight and how to respect their boundaries when that's not what they want….I think AKOG has built a stronger critical consciousness in me by providing a safe space that is both a) more diverse than many spaces I had ever grown up in and b) trying to improve its representation, positive representation of women of color, and inclusivity. I think it was

important to me to be challenged by a space that was ALREADY had more people of color than I had previously encountered in one community while simultaneously seeing that that space was STILL trying to improve and increase its positive representation..."

In the ending of her interview, she shared a bit more of her evolvement from her AKOG journey and one of her favorite mentee moments:

"The moment I had with a girl regarding racism in her school had such a big impact on me. I felt really upset and angry that one of the girls had experienced this, and she seemed relatively cavalier about it. She was unhappy, but it wasn't destroying her or anything. I think in that moment, I got a healthy dose of my own privilege and also learned to check myself.... That was a moment that I learned that I could hear her out and give her my take on the situation (to find an adult, etc.), but also that there were other people who could do a much better job than I could about talking about this. ------Honestly, in retrospect, I wonder if I should've just admitted to her outright that I hadn't experienced what she was talking about. At the time, I didn't want to lose my status as a 'mentor,' ...It made me aware of my own positionality in the space in such a different way…

My favorite moment as a mentor was when, at the end of a semester, a girl who had kind of held me (and the other mentors) at an arm's length asked if she could hug me before we left for the summer. She didn't typically like physical contact and had made that clear, and so the fact that she had made the choice to ask for a hug was a BIG DEAL to me and meant a lot. I felt really gratified, like I had had some kind of positive impact in her life..."

While transcribing her interview, I will have an honest moment and share with you that I cried. Sara's words, her evolvement and growth, her truths and vulnerability, and

willingness to do the work to unpack herself to be committed the girls and the space, and honestly to this world, is quite beautiful. Her journey in a sense confirmed the quote "the fruits of our labor", because she is proof of what love and support given can do not only for a program, but for the individuals within it.

Jessica's and Alexa's Journey

In this type of work of creating change, you will learn that there are struggles among successes. While the goal is to push mentors to be more critically conscious of themselves, there is the reality that not all of them will feel that push. You learn in this work, that most of the time, you are simply planting seeds for growth. While you may have the opportunity to see some of your seeds sprout a bit, or even better, grow into a flower, there are some seeds that just take a little bit more time…

This analogy of planting seeds in this work comes from the journeys of two white mentors, Jessica and Alexa. While these two individuals have their own distinct journeys, in all honesty, they share some great commonalities that makes them an interesting duo.

Jessica and Alexa actually grow up together in Brooklyn, NY, in one of the most gentrified neighborhoods, Bed-Stuy. Jessica (class of 2020) is two years older, attending Clark first. After Alexa (class of 2022) came during Jessica's sophomore year to tour the school with her, she then came two years later. Their commonalities extend to several aspects: where and how they were raised, their mutual feelings of "wokeness" because of where they come from and the diversity within the city that they felt they experienced, and in their beginnings as mentors, they truly feel that they "got it" and fully understood the girls…

But did they?

Who are Jessica and Alexa to the world?

When I asked who they are, they ironically began with the same line: "Well, I am a white woman from Brooklyn, New York…"

I thought that was quite interesting.

Jessica continues:

"Well, I am a white woman from Brooklyn, New York… I grew up with both my parents and my two sisters, and I am the middle child. In the early years of life, because of my dad's high paying job, my family was pretty well-off, so my sister and I attended private schools, where all my friends attended too. When my father lost his job, when I was in 7th grade, it was quite devastating not only for my family, but personally for me. I had been so comfortable in the private school life, that the switch to public school and having to take the bus was daunting...I would have to make new friends with people who already knew each other...the transition to public school was rough for me in the beginning, but I eventually made friends with my classmates and found groups to fit into."

I then ask her, did your public school friend group reflect the group of friends you had at private school? This I thought could be interesting.

*"*Now that I think of it, yes they did. I will be honest and say that my main friend group that I hung out with outside of school were all white. Most of my friends of color, if not all, were mostly at-school friends...I don't think this was a conscious effort to only have more personal relationship with my white friends… it's just that we lived in different neighborhoods.

Her transitions of schooling experiences highlights several things. Before 7th grade, Jessica lives a well-off life and attends a pretty expensive private school. When her father loses his job, she is then thrown into the realities of public schooling and confronted with the change of her family's socio-economic status. While their status changes, she tries to mirror her private school life, and this example is shown through her personal relationship with only white classmates who live in nearby neighborhoods. Her reasoning behind the lack of personal relationships with friends of color may very well not be ill-intentioned or an conscious effort, it highlights something deeper-- whiteness.

Alexa who she is:

"I am a white woman from Brooklyn, New York… raised in two separate households because of my parents divorce, and I have a twin brother...I went through public schooling all my life… Especially in my early years of schooling, I didn't really recognize racism and sexism until middle school. I was able to recognize clear distinctions amongst certain people… what identities gravitated towards each other and what groups hung together all the time, especially how groups of students of color only hung with each other.. So I was definitely observant at such an early age of race and class.."

When I asked them about their journey in deciding to Clark, they both shared similar sentiment of the price-point, distance from home (close enough, yet far enough), and the city "vibe" they liked from it. I then specifically asked questions around Main South, the neighborhood that Clark is within:

Alexa- "I didn't really know anything about Main South before arriving at the school, and I guess the first thing I noticed was that people weren't really interacting with the community outside of Clark as much as I thought we would be. I then realized that this

was probably based upon the population of Main South, and the class differences between Clark students and inhabitants of the neighborhood…

I think in some ways I have adopted these perceptions of Main South in the way that I don't think I would feel super comfortable walking alone at night on Main Street or Park Avenue, and this is probably because of the characterizations that I have heard about Main South..but I also feel similarly when I am walking alone in the dark at home, so maybe that's just my fears as a young woman speaking... "

Jessica- " I heard bad things about Worcester, and specifically Main South, but I really didn't hold on closely to what people said… every city has their bad and good, much like Brooklyn. For me, my only issue coming from Brooklyn to Worcester, was that public transportation would be less accessible to me… now being here for two years, I feel the same about transportation, but I do love Worcester. I can definitely say working at the local school and being apart of AKOG has allowed for me to appreciate the diverse people of Worcester… I have had some bad experiences, but overall pretty good..."

Who are Jessica and Alexa to All Kinds of Girls?

This part really highlights how their journeys are quite similar.

Let's begin with Jessica...

I had known Jessica prior to her becoming a mentor for the program. She had auditioned to be a part of an improv comedy team I am a member of at Clark. Her audition was so strong, as she was incredibly witty and hilarious. Once she got on the team and we attended practices together, I realized quickly she came into the space with some problematic comedy values. Some of the jokes she made were racist, such as her joke in the improv line game '185', in which the joke is set up as such:

"185 blanks walk into a bar… and the bartender says we don't serve your kind… the blanks respond with (punch line/joke insert)"

Our suggestion was "tires" , and here was her "joke":

"185 tires walk into a bar, and the bartender says we don't' serve your kind here. The tires respond, 'is it because we blackity blacks?'"

I recall that the rest of my white improv team members cringingly laughed, while I sat there just staring at her. She laughed at her own joke, not realizing the impact it had on the only member of color, which as was me, a Black woman.

After practice, I asked to chat with her briefly. I had to let her know how much her "joke" hurt me, and it ultimately hurt me that she didn't even think it was wrong or to even check in with me after she saw my mood negatively shift after her joke. This was a lack of awareness of the effects of her own whiteness. After explaining my hurt, she began crying and continuously apologizing… I made the choice after our brief meeting, to text her:

"I forgive you, and I hope you work on being more well-intentioned with your improv…"

When I saw her application in the Fall of 2016, I remember telling Fatima that we shouldn't accept her at all because of my problematic experience. But I paused in that moment, and thought, well had I really forgiven her? I did. Why am I still holding this against her? In this moment, I had to learn the true act of forgiveness and acceptance of the fact that people can change.

Fatima and I both thought, could this program help change her?

I ask Jessica about how she got involved in AKOG:

"I learned about AKOG from club fair with my friend Nicole, in which we both wanted to find ways to be more involved in the community, we saw AKOG's booth. We immediately signed our names on the list of interested mentors, and learned that there was an application and interview process. I thought to myself, 'wow, this is super serious!' A day later, my friend and I received an email from Fatima with the link to the application. I filled out my application, which it took me two days to finish, because the questions were pretty specific and deep. There were questions that asked me questions about my identity and what I had to offer to the program… I was shook... as I had not been prepared to answer those type of questions… never really thought about that... Reflecting back, these type of questions are so necessary if people want to become mentors."

In the next part of this interview, Jessica reflects on the moment I shared with you all about her problematic joke. For her to share her side and how she thought this would affect her acceptance as a mentor was quite compelling:

"After sending my application, I was sent a link to select a time for an interview with you [me]. I was super nervous, because you and I were dealing with a very personal situation because of my poor choices… I knew you had forgiven me, but I was unsure if you would still hold it over my head and not accept me as a mentor… our interview was actually great, and I found myself learning more about you and myself… I felt more comfortable and even felt connected to you...I was relieved about the interview, but also relieved to know that our relationship was good and that you have given me a chance to be a better person in your eyes…"

I remember smiling, and she too smiled. I thought to myself... "people can and do change"... I was amazed that she felt comfortable reflecting on this moment and willingness to share it with me.

I then ask for Jessica to share about her experience as a mentor and then being promoted to the leadership role as Treasurer:

"Reflecting back on my experience as a mentor, I can now realize in some ways my whiteness may have gotten in the way or I may have been problematic in some ways, I am unsure… I began as a mentor with my friend Nicole, who is a woman of color, and we always stayed by each other during the program… I think in some ways, I was able to use her a bridge to be able to connect with the girls of color in my group, the comfort shared with her was also extended to me, which I found interesting… I wonder had she not been there with me, would I have been so connected with the girls…"

I wonder too. I think Jessica highlights ways in which she may not have outright enacted whiteness or harmful mentorship, but instead highlights how her whiteness could have been problematic through the use of her friend of color to create relationships with girls of color instead of her taking that initiative on her own...

"... I applied to be the treasurer because I wanted to be more involved in the program, I wanted to do more beyond my role as just a mentor… this role definitely changed kinda' who I am and how I viewed the program… I understood the logistics behind what made this program run so strongly, which has always been cool to be a part… much of how this program runs is because you and Fatima's leadership and pushing the rest of Steering Committee to be as passionate about the program as you both are…"

Jessica was there when we lost funding, and was the only one other than Fatima and I from steering committee to ensure the program went on…

"... when we suddenly lost funding and our faculty adviser basically said we should end the program, I knew that wouldn't be an option for you and Fatima, and me too... this program is too special to just end... this program taught me so much more about myself than any other experience... I was ready to fight for it to continue.. We will do anything for AKOG, it's not just a campus club... it's a program that many people rely on for purpose in life..."

Jessica shared a bit more about her own transformations as a mentor, but also as a person:

...While in my role as treasurer, I still remained a mentor, where I was able to follow the same group of girls as they got older... I have such close relationships with Sharice and Amoya, I've been their mentor since they were 9 years old... when they were younger all they wanted to do was play and just tell me random things...but now that they are older, I noticed that they are more aware of their identities as young women of color, and have even become aware of my identity as their white mentor... I think they have really come to understand through our deeper conversations, that we have different identities that come with different experiences... I have learned that in this work and as a white mentor, that I have to listen more and talk less... I have learned so much about how to be supportive to people of color and their experience by learning that the first step is to listen..."

This next part, Jessica shares her feelings about Fatima and I leaving our roles:

"...I often thought of stepping down from being treasurer many times because I am overwhelmed. Sometimes I doubt if i am good at my role, but you and others make me feel like I am the best in my role, which as always been so affirming to who I am as a person because I often doubt a lot of my skills. This made me not want to step down from my role, especially when you leave. I know senior year will be crazy for me, but I want

ensure that everything with the program will go smoothly as long as I am here. I am willing to check people to make sure the program is ran the right way, when you and Fatima were leaders...it's only right…."

This is the same person that back in Fall of 2016 I would have never thought to have a strong bond with. While she was able to unpack her whiteness and issues of consciousness, she was able to teach me such valuable things: true acts of forgiveness and that given love and support to change, that people will change eventually…

Now for Alexa…

While I did not have the same super problematic experience with her as I did with Jessica, Alexa gave me a certain type of vibe that I am still trying to understand. Her type of whiteness that she exuded was that she "gets it". In her interview to be a mentor with Fatima, she had mentioned that she was good for this role because she deeply understood "the experiences of people of color, such as poverty and institutionalized racism… much of this knowledge I learned from being born and raised in Brooklyn and have close friends of color…"

How can she deeply understand this when these aren't her own lived experiences? I, as a person of color, don't even really deeply understand all problematic issues I go through because of my identity… so how can she?

Like Jessica, I wanted to give Alexa a chance...

I asked Alexa how she got involved in AKOG:

"I learned about AKOG because of a tour I had with Jessica, I actually came to visit the program briefly back in 2017… I remember thinking 'oh wow this program is really

cool… like I am all for female empowerment and all that AKOG stands for, I can really see myself doing well in this type of work of empowering young girls… like I was once their age, so I can definitely relate…"

In doing this work, I learned that because I was once the girls' age doesn't necessarily mean I will instantly relate. This is a new generation of girls who are experiencing very different things than I did at their age. Even beyond previous age experience, there other factors that are important when thinking of the ways you could relate to youth: your race, your culture, your personal morals and value, etc.

There was an assumption from Alexa that she would be a "good mentor," that girls of color could be relatable to because of her experience of being their age…

Alexa then shares how she viewed the interventions:

"...The process of becoming a mentor for me was really great because it allowed the mentors to bond together and learn about each other deeply.... Trainings truly emphasized the importance of our work and gave us helpful tools of how to deal with difficult situations with girls if needed… I remember discussing Worcester and Main South, and I thought that was helpful because we needed to recognize the unfair stigma that Main South might have in some mentors' minds, which for me I think I already understood coming from a pretty similar urban city…

...trainings pushed mentors to be more accepting and open to different identities than their own… to me I sort of had this already as I went into the program being very open minded about who the girls were and what they wanted to do…"

I have found Alexa to be one of the few mentors who came into the space genuinely feeling like they "get it", therefore they feel like they do not need to do the work of

unpacking themselves and their whiteness to be more critically conscious of themselves in the space. Whereas mentors who come into the space similar to that of Sara, they are willing to learn how to unpack themselves to fully do the work to the best of their ability.

While Alexa carried this "I get it" consciousness into the space, there are some ways that these "well-intentioned yet problematic" assumptions can be harmful to the space.

Later in her first semester as a mentor, Alexa applies to be a Curriculum Coordinator. She doesn't get promoted because the other applicants that were chosen who had stronger interviews and commitments to the program. One mentor of color and one white mentor.

Alexa shares how not recieving the position affected her:

"... When I got rejected for the role as Curriculum Coordinator, I was definitely hurt in a way… I later learned that it was because I had missed some program meetings, so it appeared as though I was not fully committed...I had also learned that sometimes I took up too much space that was needed for the girls, I had not even realized this… so I definitely took this as a learning moment to become a better mentor that the girls deserve, and maybe one day, I can apply for the role again...While I initially didn't really think of the complexities and issues that could arise from the mentor-mentee relationship because of perhaps the difference in identity... it was when I was in the middle of the work, that I realized I may have had some slip-ups as a mentor with making assumptions of what the girls needed… I am still trying to work on this, as I find myself unconsciously doing this...I definitely need to remind myself of how much space I am taking up and able to take up because of my identity as a white mentor with a bit of position of power over my mentees… because the space is not for me… it is for them…"

While I may not be around to see Alexa's plant grow fully, I definitely feel like a seed has been planted and even sprouted due to her ability to reflect. She was able to turn a moment that could have made her walk away from the program, instead into a learning moment so that she can be a better mentor for the program and the girls, but also a better person for this world...

Fatima's Journey

Through this work, I found my sister, Fatima.

She is soft-spoken and introverted naturally, she wears her heart on her shoulder, loves to make those around her feel good, patient and calm… I often say that she is "the yin to my yang", in the way that we both can agree that our personalities are quite opposite, yet we complement each other.

Our connection happened instantaneous and naturally, almost as if we were destined to meet...

Who is Fatima in this world?

I have always loved the name 'Fatima', as the meaning behind the name is quite beautiful.

In the religion of Islam, Fatima is he name of the prophet Mohammed's daughter, who is considered the mother of all women in the world. I think this is quite fitting for who she is, as many would say Fatima has a nurturing, almost motherly, spirit and nature about her. From the moment I met her, I felt this.

"... how I was raised, I just feel like I had to grow up a lot quicker than a lot of kids, something that I am still processing now as an adult… I love where I am from,

Watsonville, California. I grew up in a small rural and agricultural area, where we are actually 7 minutes from the actual town...I really like it because it has its own type of quiet, because there is less cars driving around...but the reality is that it is an area that is considered low-income, there is a lot of issues where I am from… there are no sidewalks, and we didn't get street lights until my first year of college...the county doesn't really care about this area because it's working migrant Mexican people that live there… the county doesn't care about fixing the roads or even adding sidewalks, and it's sad because it is actually quite dangerous for people to walk in which people risk their lives to get to work or home."

When I asked what brought her all the way from California to Clark, she responded:

"...I came to Clark because the financial aid package gave me more than other schools, and I was really attracted to their psychology department… Once I got here, the transition was a bit overwhelming… I found it hard trying to understand my balance.. Once I settled and made friends, I felt a bit more balance in being at Clark…"

Then I dug a bit deeper, in asking her about her experience once she arrived. Especially her views on Main South:

"...I have never felt particularly unsafe unlike many of my white Clark counterparts...But I feel that this is mostly because I come from a very similar low-income and Latinx neighborhood - everything the sheltered people fear about Main South, in a way makes me feel more at home....I feel like I can fit in this local community much more than I do in a white suburban community. When Clark flew me out for Traina scholars/admitted students weekend, I remember sitting in the 'fancy' awards dinner and the white people sitting my tables wouldn't stop talking about how 'sketchy' the neighborhood was. One even brought up a story her school counselor told her before she came to visit about her daughter getting her car window broken while she was visiting Clark. Immediately the

table was tense with judgment and stereotypes, and the friend I made that day and I started to unpack those criminalizing and negative narratives these people had. My friend was from Oakland and shared her positive experiences in urban spaces. I wish someone told me it would get worse once I actually came here because it is difficult hearing privileged people always bash low-income and communities of color….”

I think it is very interesting to compare and contrast the experiences and perceptions of the white mentors with those of Fatima, a woman of color…

Take a moment to re-read how they framed Main South… Take a moment to re-read how they grew up…

Take a moment to realize the distinct different realities and their views of the world around them are essentially shaped by their identities and how they were raised...

Who is Fatima to All Kinds of Girls?

“I am always guided towards leadership positions, even though I don’t really see myself as a leader, because I am shy and to an extent very introverted...I think other people recommended me to be in these roles…”

 I think that is really interesting… how she views herself. I have always felt that Fatima was a natural leader, so to hear she feels otherwise… is interesting.

“I learned about AKOG during the club fair and this youth program stood out from the rest due to its female identifying only competent… I felt like young girls in this world really need spaces dedicated for them..I was surprised that there was not a screening process when I joined the program...I actually recall my first day as a mentor, it was truly magical… I felt like home… but also realized why it felt like home, because I felt so

deeply connected to the girls, the majority of the girls there were of Latinx backgrounds… what was also interesting is that my white roommate was a mentor too, when we got back home and shared our experiences, they were distinctly different… she talked about how much fun the girls were to be around, while I too agreed, I also talked about how much I felt really Brown in the space in comparison to the 90% white mentors there… my roomate responded 'oh wow, I hadn't really noticed that'..."

This is a moment that Fatima discusses how she saw the whiteness in the program, and how this affected how she felt in the space.. She felt "really Brown" in the space in which her white roommate didn't even consider or think about how disportionate the white mentors were to the mentees of color.

Fatima then discusses how she was promoted to her role as Mentor Coordinator:

"... Like you Nia, as another mentor of color at the time, I had seen the issues that were happening in the program… I was always wondering how could I address them?... The Mentor Coordinator at the time, Hannah, reached out to me personally as she thought I would be a good fit for the role, she invited me to Acoustic Java [local coffee shop] to discuss more about the role… Looking back, I realized that she really gassed me up, saying 'the girls really love you and gravitate towards you… you're a natural leader…'...it was nice to hear that she saw leadership within me...After quickly applying and interviewing, I got the role.. I was a bit shocked, but I also realized how much responsibility I was gaining… As Mentor Coordinator, you are really seen as the overall leader of AKOG, which is really powerful… When I learned you also got the position and I would be co-leader with you, I was super excited and knew that we were going to make some things happen!..."

I then asked for Fatima to really tell her own personal journey in this role:

"...You and I immediately jumped into our roles as Mentor Coordinators… it just seemed so natural for us... we met several times on Facetime during the summer before we actually got to really be leaders … we sat for hours talking about how we were going to make changes that were intentional and right… I never felt in the beginnings of our co-leadership that we shared different goals, it seemed like we agreed on everything that was needed to be done, I think that isn't common in leadership...we knew our goal was to truly make AKOG an inclusive space for both mentors and mentees… we implemented a screening process such as applications and interviews, where we actually were able to meet the people… this gave us the opportunity to see what people could bring to the space, their strengths and weaknesses, and how we could meet them where they were at to make them great mentors for the program…

You and I also did outreach in our women of color community, I do think there was rhetoric around AKOG being a program that was created by white women, so it should be for white women… and this can be intimidating for women of color… Lastly we planned intentional workshops and trainings that would really push the mentors accepted to unpack their identities and any biases that they could bring into the space...through race and identity dialogues and activities like the step-in circle… we had community members from Main South speak about their experiences and help reshape their views of the neighborhood...My favorite activities that I personally liked to include in trainings are writing reflection and sharing type of activities. I like to include these because it creates much needed space and time to reflect on what is important to us, who we are, and how we as women we have so much in common - that there is no reason not to work together...we did a lot, sister. As I reflect back, we did so much in so little time...we should proud of ourselves…"

Our first year we did a lot of implementing and seeing what did and did not work...our second year, we actually saw the changes of our implementation… There was more representation of mentors in the space… more critically-conscious people… and mentors

who really were supporting each other and excited to do this work… it was amazing… In our third year, it was hard because I left for my semester abroad, and I hated leaving you alone and taking a step away from the program…

...the next year, we got to really see the fruits of our labor and love that we poured into the program… who came into this space was different, the attitude of each new mentor we had accepted and trained seemed ready to do this work...the program felt so different, it felt so right… When I went abroad my Junior year(fall 2017), it was hard to leave the program and you… it was hard no to be apart of all the things we built together, to not be able to meet and be around new and old mentors, to not be able to see our girls faces and their bright energy and smiles...being away from our baby, it was one of the toughest experiences..

...the transition of returning back to campus in itself was a challenge, but returning back to our baby was a bit more of a challenge… there were new mentors I had never met and there was this presence of new sense of community that you all created that I had to navigate and learn to be apart of… I just felt a bit out of place, but I expected this kind of…

… now in our final year, our last training we planned and led was one of the best… there was so much love shared between the mentors that just met...our dialogues in this training were so intense, yet we all collectively learned about each other… that day a sisterhood was created, it was beautiful… i think this happened because people saw how much we fought for this program to continue on despite lost of funding…
...Prior to our senior year, we both discussed leaving the program with a 'bang'... we wanted to leave AKOG tied up with a perfect bow to be gifted to our future leaders… we are truly passing on a gift, our baby…

...On our last day, I will be heartbroken… it will mean that I am forced to come with terms that I will have to leave… I pray and hope that the future leaders pour as much love and energy into this program as we have…"

Fatima is truly a gift to this undeserving world. I am so thankful that through this life's work we both share, that I was blessed with a true bond and sisterhood. Her resiliency, her passion, her constant love and support, her willingness to acquire any and all knowledge she can, her authenticity, her compassion for spaces and others is truly indescribable…

Through walking hand in hand in our life's work, she has taught me how to be a better leader. To listen more, and talk less, and when I do talk be intentional about my words.... To be more understanding, and to take more pauses before reacting, to really love on myself on the days that I didn't think I could, she has taught me the act of forgiveness and the intense process of acceptance and healing…

Fatima has been there for me on the days when I was ready to give up and call it quits; my struggles of life. and has been there for me for my biggest accomplishments, my successes of life….

she has taught me life lessons that no book could ever cover in this world.

Out of all her teachings, she has taught me to always lead life with love.

Mentees

Ariana's and Unique's Journey

For four years, as I watched them grow, they watched me grow too. Over the course of this time, we created a bond of I am the big sister, and they were my little sisters. We

created a bond of honesty, support and love. I kept it real with them, and they always kept real with me. I am now 22 years old and they are 16 years old, while they seen changes in the program and the mentors, they also saw changes in me and theirselves.

Who are Ariana and Unique to the world?

Both Ariana and Unique were born in Worcester and raised in the Main South neighborhood. While they loved their neighborhood and all the different type of people in it, they often heard of the negative things people said… especially from people who weren't from their neighborhood, like the Clark college students.
Unique is a Black girl, who is raised by a Black mother and Latino step-father. Ariana is Dominican and Puerto-rican, raised by her father and step-mother. Both of them have a younger sister in the program too, one of them I mentioned before, Sharice, who is the mentee of Jessica.

What is quite beautiful about this part, is how much they value and are so proud of where they come from. This, in so many ways, juxtaposes the initial negative feelings of Sara, Jessica, and Alexa had about the Main South neighborhood.

(Unique) "... I think it's really unfair [she actually curses, but I replace this with a bit nicer word] that people who aren't from here or even really live here get to have such strong opinions about the neighborhood I was raised in… like who are you to tell me my city is bad when you don't even leave your campus to see how amazing it really is… we have great culture and diversity… tons of great restaurants, parks, and hidden cool places… It actually hurts me when I hear what people say about where I am from because I am really proud… I know my community needs work, because is a lot of drug and crime problems, but I am going to do whatever it takes to make my community the best it can be...I was always taught to be proud of who I am, Main South and Worcester is who I am… it made me who I am… so why not be proud of it and make it be the best…"

(Ariana) "...I am proud to be from the Latinx community… we are so unique and have so many cultures and diversity… I love it… Main South reminds of a little DR [Dominican Republic]... it's not because there is a lot of Dominicans, because of how close the people are here… people choose to not see how great of a community Main South is because of what they are told from people or what they choose to see or not see… When I was younger, I used to hate where I come from because everyone, even the people in it sometimes, seemed to hate it...we were tired of it being called the trash part of Worcester… whenever someone spoke of my community, it was always bad, never good... What's been great in these past couple years, Main South youth, including Unique and I, have been really trying to change how are community is seen… we want people to see the 'amazingness' of it, the cultures, our talented and diverse people, our closeness, and how strong we are...if everyone from Main South understood how great we are as a community, we would be so powerful..."

Who are Ariana and Unique to AKOG?

I began this part of the interview by asking them both how was the program prior to Fatima's and my leadership:

(Ariana) "...I had been in AKOG since I was 9 years old… when I first started the program, I was younger so I wasn't really aware of the issues the program had...I was just there to have fun and be around my friends… when I turned 11, I think that's when I realized there was some issues...for example, I had one white mentor who constantly wanted to touch and play with my hair… it was so weird, when I asked her why, she would say 'its so curly and fun!'... just made me feel like an object to her rather than her mentee. I never spoke to her how it made me feel uncomfortable because I really didn't know how to express it at that time… Another example would be was with one of my mentors who was from Colombia… I enjoyed being able to speak spanish with her, but I

realized after talking to her, she was raised like a rich white girl… she really didn't care for her own culture and our Latinx community… she even said very negative things about Mexican people, which made me feel uncomfortable...the mentors were cool, but it wasn't until you [me] became a leader of the program, that I got really close with most of my mentors…"

(Unique) " ...I actually remember when I was 10 years old in the program, I heard one of my mentors outside on the phone when I was leaving the program… she had told whoever on the phone that she was in AKOG to get volunteer hours for her class and that she would only be in for a semester… it made me think I wasn't important to her.. the sad part about it was she was one of my mentors...I felt like the girls and I in the program were being used...I wasn't really close with any of the mentors, but I did have fun for the most part. I think when you and Fatima became leaders… I realized how many problems the program really had…"

In the last part of their interview, I then wanted them to speak to the changes and transformations they witnessed in the program during Fatima's and my leadership:

(Unique) "... I remember returning to AKOG (fall 2016), and learning that you were no longer my mentor, but that you were now a leader of the program...I was excited to hear this, because you deserved to be a leader...you were the only mentor that seemed to to really get us and wanted to fully support us… I will never forget when you first started as a mentor, that very first day me and the rest of the girls grew close to you so quickly… that's because you got us and didn't judge or try to be like something you are not to make us like us… you were just you… To me, it is super cool to see you and Fatima in leadership, like it is really empowering… a Black woman and Latina woman… that's great representation that all us girls need to see…
I definitely saw changes… the mentors seemed real genuine and excited to be apart of our lives… it felt like a space of no judgement or problems… I look forward to coming to

AKOG each Saturday because I knew I could come and be myself with my mentors and friends...In school, I don't feel that excitement because my teachers are so judge-gy and choose to not get me… I am just glad to have AKOG…"

(Ariana) "... I have definitely seen changes in AKOG since Fatima and you became leaders… like A LOT of changes… I definitely feel less uncomfortable around mentors now more than ever… I mean the discomfort still is there because I feel like some of them are still trying to work on themselves to be a better mentor, but slip-ups is natural...like Unique, I do feel like this a safe and comfortable space for not only the girls but also the mentors… we talk about real personal things like our cultures, politics, gender and sexuality, and more… things we do not discuss in school or in our homes… AKOG gives us a space to talk about things we do not get the chance to because it is frowned upon or isn't right to talk about… this space has helped a lot of girls get through personal issues, and I am sure without it, I don't know what they would have done… You and Fatima are great leaders who made good changes for this program… I am glad my younger sister gets to be a part of the better years of this program and I get to hear all about it… I age out this year because I am turning 17, so I am really sad to be honest… I been in this program for 7 years, and the last four years I have my most favorite memories from… I am really going to miss AKOG… It will always be in my heart…"

During their interviews, I cried. If you haven't noticed, I am a big cry baby. Although I do put up this tough exterior, but inside I am very soft...I truly feel a lot. Especially when it comes to AKOG.

Ariana's and Unique's Journeys truly sheds light on how absolutely brilliant and aware youth are. They both saw and felt the issues in the program when the leaders before Fatima and I didn't even recognize the problems that existed. Or maybe, they simply chose not to. Who knows?

Ariana and Unique bring up fascinating insights about how young people's minds work and how they view the world and themselves in it. They are deeply aware of issues in our world that exist and how they are susceptible to these very issues. While most people in our society do not give credit or even see youths' agency and autonomy, they need to recognize that youth are critically and actively engaging in the world around them to make it better for their future and others.

Fatima and I became leaders and poured so much of ourselves into this program, but not for ourselves. We did it for the girls. While there is value in seeing women in leadership that look like you and reflect your lived experiences, there is even more value, and immense power, in seeing these very women do what's right to better the spaces they are leading. After hearing how Ariana and Unique felt about the program and its changes, it made Fatima's and my fight to make this program better, so beyond worth it.

**(Left Photo) Me and Ariana at United Way charity event after speaking about AKOG.
(Right) Photo) Unique show her painting on 'Art Day' at AKOG..**

AKOG's Journey: The Big Picture

Effects of Interventions: (Key: MoC= Mentors of color)

- **Outreach to women of color on campus**
  - Changed the overall stigma of AKOG being a program only for white women could be apart of active outreach to cultural/affinity clubs on campus and speaking with women of color.
  - (2015) 3 MoC → (2016) 6 MoC → (2017-2019) → 13 MoC
- **The creation of a "Screening Process" (Application, Interviews and Workshop)**
  - Changed the rhetoric that being a mentor for AKOG was this easy, free-for-all process
  - Created procedures that allowed for the Mentor Coordinators to actually understand who was the person that applied and allowed for more personable interactions to gage whether or not they would be dedicated to this work.
  - While the numbers of mentors from 2016-2019 (30-40 mentors) were lower than 2015 (50 mentors), the type of people who applied to become a mentor were more intentional and dedicated individuals, and rarely did we find that those who applied were using the program for volunteer/service hours.
- **The creation of trainings that are intentional and help mentors feel supported in doing this work**
  - Trainings assisted mentors in becoming more critical-conscious of themselves not only in the AKOG space, but beyond it. It provided with more tools and ways of support in navigating difficult dialogues and situations with the girls that could lead to disconnects and lack of seeing their brilliance.
  - Trainings made mentor feel even more supported and affirmed our collective vision of leading with love, support and empowerment of the girls and with each other.
  - Youth Mental Health Facilitator and CPR trainings and certifications provided.
- **Monthly Mentor Bondings, Program Morning Check-ins and Departure Debrief**
  - Created spaces that allowed for mentors to feel supported and valued by their fellow mentors and leadership
  - Bondings allowed for us to have fun (Sip and Paint Nights, Bowling night, etc) and really gave opportunity to get to know each other more outside the program.

In the diagram above, I present the effects the interventions had on AKOG and its mentors. While most of the effects and transformation are considered "successes", there were some aspects that Fatima and I struggled with. The diagram below highlights struggles.

Struggles of Interventions:

● **Outreach to women of color on campus and our "ideal" mentor**
- While we did gain an increase in mentors of color, we found that we mostly focused on our outreach to women of color. We found that we sometimes neglected our focus on outreach to white women who felt they could really do this work of mentoring urban female-youth. We often had to remind ourselves to re-center our focus on gaining All Kinds of Mentors...

● **The creation of a "Screening Process"**
- The main struggle with creating the application and interview process, was that Fatima and I were full time undergraduate students who were also doing full time work as Mentor Coordinators. While we go through this process understanding its deeper purpose of gaining more intentional and aware mentors, it often took a toll on our academic and personal schedules.

● **The creation of trainings that are intentional and help mentors feel supported in doing this work**
- While trainings were deep and intentional spaces filled with great dialogues and activities that helped mentors feel more equipped to do this type of work, we often found that these four hour bi-monthly training we never enough. If we had more time and funding, we would do more trainings that allowed mentors feel more supported in their various types of mentorship and help them gain certifications for youth work.

● **Planting Seeds**
- While we found that many mentors, after experiencing these interventions, had become more critically-conscious of their identities, power, and privileges. This was seen through their positive and mutually-beneficial relationships with their mentees. Yet, there were very few mentors that seemed to be still "getting it" after experiencing the interventions. These few came into the program believing that they fully "got" the girls, and learned quickly that they didn't (ie: Alexa). These very mentors were often the ones the girls would complain about because they: (1) took up too much space in conversations they had, (2) and made assumptions about the girls lives and attempted to "fix" them. While Fatima and I may not see their full evolvement, we understand that we may have planted seeds for their growth.

Notable Quotes That Shed Light on the Effects of Interventions:

> " ...I think the best thing for an organization is leaders who can see serious problems and who also still carry genuine love for the organization. I see that in Fatima and Nia. They clearly love mentorship, love AKOG, and are able to say 'this needs to be fixed.' To me, that inspires a lot of hope. An organization that was developed over 20 years ago is going to NEED reorganization and redevelopment, and I'm really glad that Fatima and Nia took the initiative..."
>
> (Sara, Mentor)

"…I think AKOG has built a stronger critical consciousness in me by providing a safe space that is both a) more diverse than many spaces I had ever grown up in and b) trying to improve its representation (positive representation of women of color) and inclusivity. I think it was important to me to be challenged by a space that was ALREADY had more people of color than I had previously encountered in one community while simultaneously seeing that that space was STILL trying to improve and increase its positive representation…"

(Sara, Mentor)

"…While trainings did help, I think I grew more from specifically learning from the girls. They taught me so much about the Worcester community without even knowing. They showed me that Worcester does not get the praise that it deserves.…Fatima and Nia treat AKOG as if it was their child, which is so understandable because they have worked hard to improve certain conditions. I hope the future Mentor Coordinators also take the program seriously… I think when we did the "step in, step out" activity at training, it made mentors (especially myself) think about the privileges that I did not believe I possessed. It helped me be more aware of my blind biases that I didn't think existed…"

(Mya, Curriculum Coordinator & Mentor)

"...I have definitely grown from my participation with AKOG and Fatima and Nia's leadership. I think your transparency about your goals for AKOG was one of the first personal interactions I had with a community that was trying to highlight and support women of color in leadership positions, and one of the first personal experiences I had seeing how much that truly matters..."
(Ashley, Mentor)

These quotes suggest that there was recognition of the interventions, and that in and of itself was impactful. The mentors saw that change was needed, and that steps could be taken to promote change. There's also recognition that particular activities (part of the "training") helped mentors think about their own privilege and become more aware of "blind biases" -- elements of developing more critical consciousness, and deconstructing Whiteness. They also saw women of color in leadership roles -- fighting to make change, and coming to realize "how much that truly matters." And they show evidence of "learning from the girls," not necessarily seeing that linked to the interventions, but seeing the impact of that in their growth. During Fatima's and my time as AKOG leaders, the program has become a more inclusive and liberatory space, and this is in part, I argue, because of the interventions we put in place. The words of the mentors, and the journeys of the focal mentors and girls, and the big picture journey of AKOG as a program speak about the possibility of change and some of the specific mechanisms of change -- in decolonizing Whiteness in a predominantly white institution. During the time of Fatima's and my leadership and interventions, AKOG has expanded -- both in terms of numbers and the kind of programming and mentoring it supports, and in the way it works with "all kinds of mentors."

Through Fatima's and my work in AKOG, we have made the program more culturally responsive and culturally sustaining. For us, we had the greatest honor of being a part of the lives of many AKOG girls and mentors.

Chapter 5: Conclusion -- The Work Has Progressed, but Isn't Finished…

There is always work to be done, and in this work, there is plenty more to do…

In the three years of doing what I call my life's work, I never quite felt that the changes Fatima and I implemented were ever enough… I always felt there was more to do.

I always thought: If people have the mentality of settling for the little changes they made in their life, then they are unable to recognize that there is always more to do. That there's always room for growth.

Acknowledging that nothing in this world is ever perfect and that everything and everyone has its imperfections -- creates a space for growth, and further, the recognizing of truths and acceptance that creates better change.

What is undeniable is the impact All Kinds of Girls has -- not only on its participants, the institution it's hosted in, the Main South neighborhood it is a part of -- but on the world.

April 27th, 2019- All Kinds of Girls Annual Community Youth Day

This was Fatima's and my last day.

This day was dedicated not only to the program and its accomplishments over a year, but it was dedicated to the need for the unifying of communities all around the world. It seemed like on this day, the world seemed to just stop and time seemed to have paused. Everyone that joined us that day, the girls and their families, the mentors and their friends, clubs and organizations, youth and folks from the community, we were all connected in this unifying moment of time in our world. It was moment in time, where everything just felt so right. The day began with down pour and intense dark clouds, but by the time the event started, it seemed like the sun came out just to shine on us.

The shared laughter, the smiles, the hugs and kisses on cheeks, the dancing and singing, the collective stuffing of faces filled with delicious food, the exchanges of kind words. If there was a such things as the "perfect" day, this would be it.

For most of the girls, I don't think it set in yet that it was Fatima's and my last day of AKOG. Some of them said, "well, you won't be gone forever right… you will come see us next semester,

right? Pinky promise me!" while the reality of this is true that Fatima and I could visit in the future , but we honestly felt it would be wrong for us to promise the girls…

Would it be wrong to return back to our baby? While we loved the thought of it, we also understood the levels of complexities with old leaders returning when the program had new leaders. The program needs to be able to exist without the gaze of Fatima and I. We needed the new leaders to know that we will always be here to help, but we also needed them to understand their power and leadership…

In our final debrief with the mentors, Fatima and I prepared to share our last words at our last program as leaders. While we had our mentor bonding planned later next week to introduce new leadership, more importantly, the new "us", it was our final AKOG day with our girls and our mentors.

We all sat in a circle. No one spoke for the first two minutes, we all just sat there for a moment and existed in the space one last time all together.

I had noticed in this moment, one of the mentors across from me reached for another mentor's hand.

I paused before I spoke. Sucking in air to hold back the tears that began to develop.

It began to set in that his was my last AKOG Saturday.

I gathered myself. "Wow, we have come a long way. Today was filled with so much love and fun that has manifested and grew from this year of being together. WE should all be proud. May everyone share one word about how the feel about our last day together?"

One of the mentors next to me apologetically says "Nia, I am sorry… but I don't think anyone in this room can say how we felt about this day in one word."

I laughed "You are right. I was just doing our usual rush debrief so everyone can get home and have their post-AKOG nap."

Everyone laughs. "True… you right…"

" You're right, but today is special… we got time" Jessica looks at me and says, with tears welling up in her eyes.

While very few said one word, and many said more. Each word added in this moment of sharing feelings of this day truly intensified the space with an unusual combination of love and sadness.

"I feel loved."

"I feel honored and thankful"

"I feel so undeserving of this space"

"I feel true sisterhood, an unbreakable bond"

"I feel like this one of the most humbling experiences of my life, I will never forget…"

"I feel like I didn't want this day to end… in all honesty, I never wanted our last day to come. You know, with Fatima and Nia leaving. I just didn't want to come to terms with this, but I have to. We all have to. I am definitely scared for the future, yet excited, because I know we will all come together to make sure AKOG runs smoothly when they leave.. It is only right" Jessica said with tears rolling down her face.

We all began to cry when Jessica said this. Each turning to each other for embraces of long hugs, exchanges of kinds words of appreciation… we all got up from the circle, and came together for a group hug.

This is what radical change looks like… this is what leading with love looked like in its truest form.

What More Can Be Done to Keep Critical Consciousness and the Girls' Brilliance at the Center?

All Kinds of Girls journey has a beginning, but definitely has no end.

The people who have been a witness to the impacts of this space, understand why its existence is necessary and realize the true importance to the girls, their community, and the world. While there has been true and demonstrable growth in the overall program, there is still more work to be done to maintain the critical-consciousness of its leaders and mentors, but more importantly, to keeping the girls' brilliance at the center.

The way to continue this work begins with the leaders and mentors. The constant being, leading with love and support for the girls, but also for each other. How do we give love, support and empowerment to the girls if we do not give it to ourselves and each other?

The constant is the consistent development of our critical-consciousness, the constant of critically thinking about who we are in the space and in the world, and why that matters. The true understanding our identities, our power, and our privileges. The acceptance of our differences, and our shared similarities that needs to exist in this space to maintain its importance.

The constant in this work means everyone who is a part of it needs to check each other with love and with the purpose of individual and collective growth, to challenge and inspire each other to do and be better, to be courageous and passionate in this work, to trust each other, and to understand our collective vision of leading with absolute love and support…

With all these constants, there is no way a program like this could become extinct. These constants push the foreverness of such a program that all girls, all around the world, deserve and need.

Letter of Love & Goodbyes: How to give away the baby?

Dear Future Leaders of All Kinds of Girls,

I want to begin by saying thank you.

If you are reading this, you have been given the gift of the AKOG baby. The baby that very few people have had the chance to hold and care for in the way it deserved.

This baby, like any human baby, needs the constant attention and nurturing for it to live. The baby requires a lot of love and dedication.

This baby will know when you don't care for it properly, because it will cry for hours on end. And if you do not find ways to soothe its cries, that may be the cause for its demise.

The honest truth about this baby is that at its early stages, it dealt with a lot of complications for a long time. Many of these complications, well, they went unnoticed and were never dealt with.

That was until two women saw the baby and its complications… they were horrified and felt the pain that radiated from the baby.

They thought, "why did no one help this baby? Did anyone see its complications?"

They realized no one did.

These two women picked up the baby in Spring of 2016, and ever since then, the baby has been theirs.

For three years, they held the baby so close to their hearts and cared for it with all the love they could.

They were able to help the baby through most of its complications, which helped it grow into a more robust baby, a healthier baby -- full of curiosity and joy…

They even shared this more healthy baby with those who too could learn to love it the same, and they did…

To those who learned to love it as the two women did, they learned that the baby loved them too.

To those who will come to love this baby, they will learn that this type of loving doesn't come easy. This type of loving has its own complications, because in order to begin to love this baby, you have to love yourself. You have to understand why loving yourself matters, and then you will be able to understand why loving this baby matters too. This baby is loved by many, and they too, need love too. This baby teaches you to not only love it, but to love others.

This baby is a lot of work, and requires hours of attention. This is a labor of love, and if you are not tired from this work, then maybe you aren't loving it fully. But if you open your eyes and heart, you can depend on the baby -- to teach you what you need to know --

if you listen carefully, and look deeply, and hold it tightly. Listen to the baby. Believe in the baby. Find ways to let the baby teach you, to wake you up and guide you, to learn and grow with you.

Dedications & Acknowledgments

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