BLACK WOMEN ENVIRONMENT CONNECTICUT

STUDY OF BLACK FEMALE ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP IN URBAN CONNECTICUT

HIXON FELLOWSHIP FINAL REPORT 2020-1

INTRODUCTION

Historically, urban environments have been dynamic and interesting spaces for ethnographers and social scientists because of the mix of people and the cultures at the heart of the urban space. The patterns of how people come together, attempt to co-exist, and experience various forces create innumerable opportunities for research that is often underexamined by the environmental field. This ethnographic research on Black women's environmental leadership in Connecticut pushes the current limits of knowledge in social scientific literature about race, gender, environment, and politics.

Through recognition of these women and their oft-ignored hard work serving the people of Connecticut, a fuller picture of urban environmentalism is developed with specific focus on Black urban culture in Connecticut. Participants included grassroots activists, municipal and state leaders, environmental educators, urban farmers, lawyers, and engaged citizens, all seeking ways to improve the lives and health of Black people and the urban environment. This study of urban Black female environmentalists provided new research that enabled me to unearth novel details about their work.

These interviews revealed a variety of concepts, including the use of politics in urban environmentalism, reframing stories of the urban environment, value of place and people, and how an intersectional perspective informs views of urban challenges. Through interviews on and observations of the participants' cultural forms of leadership, political reliance within urban environmental practice, and urban conservation, I discovered that alternative methods of informing policy development, creating new value centers within environmental institutions, and coalition building within informal grassroots networks is essential in progressing the environmental field towards solving complex community and natural threats.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The aim of my summer research was to explore what compels Black women to lead within the urban environment and what roles they play in shaping their community's efforts to protect themselves and the environment. I planned to conduct this research within a critical race and Black feminist framework with specific focus on recognition justice, grassroots activism, and leadership. Through these pillars, the research was designed to explore how Black women define the term environment and to better understand the unique and critical difference of Black female leadership, how race and gender inform their work and role within the environmental field.

What compels black women to lead within the urban environment and what role do they play in shaping their community efforts to protect themselves and the environment?

Embedded questions included:
What does "environment" and environmental protection mean for Black people within urban Connecticut culture?
How is the work in this region different, and similar to the national and global movement towards justice and community focused environmental stewardship?
What are the environmental needs across urban Connecticut as seen from within a community?
How are Black female leaders navigating politics, power and the environmental field to enhance the urban environment?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This work is intersectional at its foundation. The resources used to develop this study reflect that position in that they include environmental philosophy, ethnography, urban land use and zoning, Black feminist theory, political ecology, critical race theory, and environmental history texts. There were specifics sources that shaped the research questions and methods of this study, like that of Antoinette M. Gomez, Dr. Shafiei Fatemeh and Dr. Glenn Johnson's research in Atlanta, Georgia, entitled Black Women's Involvement in the Environmental Justice Movement: An Analysis of Three Communities in Atlanta, Georgia. This research study explored the activism of thirty Black female environmental leaders in three communities as they addressed the environmental justice issues created by local toxic facilities. Studies like this acknowledge the unique perspective of Black women within the urban Black community, and their leadership role in seeking environmental protection. As I interrogated studies like this it became apparent that they generally focused on large cities, New York, Detroit, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New Orleans. There was an obvious gap in the literature on New England, specifically Connecticut. There was no research on how Black women in Connecticut are navigating this current moment, the historically white mainstream environmental field, the environmental justice challenges, and the urban environmental practice in post-industrial cities within Connecticut.

In evaluating my research, I explored ethnographic writings to better understand how these researchers presented the complexity of shared stories. The scholarship of Elijah Anderson, William Julius Wilson, Nikki Jones, Justin Farrell and Jean Beaman help to shape my ethnographic writing and exampled how to develop theory out of a collection of qualitative data. Each of these scholars develop their sociological position from their research interviews. Their writing supported the development of my ethnographic voice. I sought to shape a perspective that is honest and honoring to my research participants and the conditions of the urban environment in Connecticut.

Other areas of scholarship supported my research development included critical race theory through Gerald Torres teachings and writing. Environmental philosophy supported the need to connect theory to practice, and writers like Avner De-Shalit supported the absolute need for social theory to translate into political practice. I was also influenced by ethics and epistemological scholarship in an effort to understand how human values, testimony and trust are integral in environmental leadership, decision making and city political power.

METHODS

My research methods included two primary forms: individual interviews over Zoom as well as participant observation of the Project Resiliency Movement Advisory Board and participant observation of the creation of a Black environmentalist network (BEAM – Black Environmental Activist Movement) in Connecticut.

Interviews – By conducting semi-structured interviews of Black women environmental activists that have led grassroots action in urban spaces in Connecticut, I aimed to represent these leaders and their work to achieve urban environmental protection for Black residents in Connecticut. The research focused on gathering information to better understand what motivates women in Connecticut to participate in urban environmental issues. I held twenty interviews. Four of those interviews were extended into a second interview session. Each interview was an hour long and participants were compensated for their time, $30 per hour. Several participants made comments about the compensation, wondering how the amount was determined and the reasoning behind that element of the research. Compensation was a priority for this research because academic research has often been extractive and neglected to value participant contributions. I wanted my participants to know that I valued their time and the stories they shared with me. For some, this gave them an opportunity to share the compensation with someone in need, many participants expressed a heightened support for people struggling financially during the pandemic. The compensation was meant to encourage participation and to value their contribution to this research study.

Participant observation – I explored my research questions through participant observation of the Project Resiliency Movement's (PRM) Advisory Board. This method was used to develop a full perspective of Black female leadership in a health and wellness resilience organization that centered Black women. By joining the PRM Advisory Board, I was able to observe and participate in the planning and discussions on adapting programing to meet the PRM network's needs during the COVID-19 shutdown. The PRM Advisory Board provided an internal view of Black female leadership and allowed me to evaluate communication functions, how leaders are formed within the space, and how priorities are determined. It also became a place to explore new narratives of Black female leadership.

My participant observation expanded to include new networks that formed in response to the heightened racial injustices that happened during the summer. During the research period, I was invited to join and assist in developing a Black environmentalist network in Connecticut. The group aimed to create a professional network across industries for Black people, with the potential to take on projects or activism to support Black community and urban environmental issues. The first few meetings of this group were spent crafting a mission statement, focus, and

spreading the word across the state. I was keenly aware that many of the group participants were within my research target group of Black female environmental leaders. The leader of the group did not intend for this to be a female led space, but the emerging leadership council was comprised of only women.

Adapting Methods – Due to COVID-19, each of these data collection methods had to be changed to comply with State and University guidelines and protect the researcher and participants. The individual semi-structured interviews were conducted over a virtual, video and audio platform, Zoom, and were recorded for future transcription. The participant observation element of this research shifted in focus to observation of the Project Resiliency Advisory Board. The observation included joining their Advisory Board and attending planning meetings to develop a case study of Black female leadership around resiliency. The PRM Advisory Board met bi-weekly during the pandemic transition and resumed monthly meetings in August. Each meeting ranged from 90 mins to 2 hours, with smaller assignments and communications between meetings. Each Advisory Board meeting had a scheduled agenda and meeting minutes. In much of the Board's interactions, there was a thin reminder of the current pandemic, but the desire to persist and plan through it was what they saw as resilience to the circumstances. The PRM network is well connected with Black women in the region, and their focus on the concerns of their target audience has made them well-known for their women's programing.

The pandemic has called for many social scientists to reexamine and alter the methods that have often been employed in their research. I found that I needed to adjust how I went about recruitment. The changes I made to the sampling procedure were due to COVID-19. The methodology for recruitment included connecting with key regional leaders and developing snowball sampling that asks that each interviewee recommend someone that fits the research focus. Due to the current crisis, there was hesitance in outsider participation and developing new relationships. It became critical for a respected interviewee to recommend the study as creditable and worthwhile. With this type of sampling, it became a challenge to have representation across all my target cities because many networks were contained within one region and its neighboring towns.

If this research were to continue, I would hope to find more information about Black environmentalist in Waterbury, New London, or New Britain. These cities have a long history and a considerable amount of industry in the past, and I would make efforts to connect these smaller cities to this study. This study, however, primarily represents Hartford and Bridgeport, which will serve as a comparative case study. The methodology of this research needed to change quickly, since the conditions were changing during the project timeframe. It is my belief that research methods for ethnographic field studies in a post-COVID world will have to adapt to a culture that has become insulated as a form of protection. Suspicion of the outsider has new meaning in the pandemic, and the value of social networks and relatability will aid the researcher. It is my hope that this research reflects this current moment of racial and pandemic tension and represents an existing ethnographic understanding of Black environmental culture in Connecticut.

RESULTS

Many themes emerged in my research that highlighted the complex existence of Black female environmental leaders in the state of Connecticut. This table of results, Table 1, is a list of emergent themes within my research.

TABLE 1

Emergent Themes:	Research Findings:
Gendered Leadership in urban Black Connecticut	Finding leadership models
	Grassroots activism
	The "third-shift" of developing projects and organizing
	The importance of Black-centered networks (church historically, sororities, professional networks, social networks that do community work)
	Mentorship and leadership development ("ghost discipleship")
	Lack of funding and recognition – finding alternative funding sources, doing a lot with very little
Urban CT Culture and Black involvement in environmental stewardship	Motivation to led within environment
	Opposition from white-led environmental space (a sort of vetting)
	Modeling stewardship of urban environment needs to be reflective of community (or need to have ability to connect with community deeply, embed)
	Shifting narratives of Black people and what they value
Urban environmentalism is political	Black female identity and leadership is made political
	Access to land, zoning decisions and activism are made political within cities. Development value competes with community needs/vision.
	Access to power, positioning self to access power over aspects of urban environmental decisions

RESULTS

These themes cover many topics that I write about elsewhere, including within my thesis, however, in this report I will focus on the radical myth of Black female leadership that I believe will benefit the specific work that the Hixon Center for Urban Ecology supports. The Hixon Center funds and develops urban environmental research across the world and locally in Connecticut. In many of these settings understanding the Black female leader will be of critical importance for researchers. Hixon engages with Black female environmental leaders, specifically in the United States, which is why my research results are pertinent to the future programming in urban spaces as researchers interact with urban, Black leaders.

Below is an excerpt from my research thesis, *Chapter 2 Radical Myths of Black Female Environmental Leadership*. This chapter aimed to explore the narratives about Black female leadership through Black radical theory. Through understanding the connection between Black female environmental leadership and the "radical" we can choose to view the radical as necessary in our field and in society. This chapter uses the radical Black theory framework to explore how Black female environmental leaders in Connecticut are contending with myths that limit their ability to lead and to shape the urban environment.

CHAPTER 2 RADICAL MYTHS OF BLACK FEMALE ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP BY ASHLEY STEWART, MESC 2021

Modern images of leadership

An image comes to mind when we think of a powerful, effective, strong leader. For many, that image is not a Black woman. Why isn't it? Black women have through American history dynamically led the Black family, communities, churches, and society. Today, Black women are the most educated demographic in the country, and they continue to make waves, set norms and to be the guides of our nation (Cottom 2018). In the fall of 2020, Black women campaigned across historically republican states like Georgia, to flip the majority vote from republican to democratic making national history (Thompson 2021). Black women like Stacey Abrams (Georgia Politician and Founder of Fair Fight Action), LaTosha Brown (Black Voters Matter Fund), DeJuana Thompson (Woke Vote), Nse Ufot (New Georgia Project) led the nation through their grassroots activism, and their leadership to vote in President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. Black women have led movements across the nation for the betterment of Black community and all of the nation. Black women have historically moved political, social and economic changes within this country, and if recent events tell us one thing, it is that we as a nation need to pay attention to Black women, support them, follow their leadership and recognize those that lead.

This research study picks up in a perfect time to account for the Black women in Connecticut that are leading communities in a wide range of roles. This past summer, through my ethnographic research on Black women's environmental leadership in Connecticut I have gained insights on Black female environmental leader (BFEL). I aimed to recognize these leaders and their hard work serving the people of Connecticut. I also wanted to find the local Black women that are working towards environmental protection of the Black community, to assess the state of Black female leadership in Connecticut and to understand what priorities these leaders have for urban Connecticut. This research was particular to the small, often overlooked state of Connecticut, because Black communities in the state have a historical existence here, and a current pressing need for representation for the Black community.

The interviews included grassroots activists, municipal and state leaders, environmental educators, urban farmers, lawyers and engaged citizens, all seeking in diverse ways to improve the life condition and health of Black urban people. In many of the interview's participants expressed a desire to example to urban Connecticut how to lead and how to grow up, learn and give back to the community. Many participants have positioned themselves to gain the power to change their community. Through these in-depth interviews and participant observations I

explored how they are shifting narratives of their existence in this field and perceptions of Black involvement in the environment through their leadership.

Although there are many myths about Black women, I want to explore a negative and destructive myth around militant, radical, dominant Black women. The "radical" label has developed a narrative about Black women, their intentions, and their rationality. The view of radical Black environmental thought can be positively seen as a call towards recognition of Black value and humanity, many do not see it as such. Often society has taken that term to mean violence to the established system that benefits mainstream society. The subtle difference between the use and meaning of the term can render a vastly different outcome for the activists and urban leaders that believe in the rights of Black women and community. Scholar Kimberly Ruffin reveals the use of myths within ecological practice and asserts that the role and degree of impact of myth making and myth sharing within the environmental field has not been acknowledged. For many this type of exploration can seem vague, but it speaks to the principles and values behind issues like who has access to change and protect the urban environment for Black people, and who doesn't.

The development of myths can take many forms, myths are told about us, and they are created by us. Earlier in this paper I discussed the myth of the radical Black woman, ideas about who she is, what she looks like and what her values and aims are. This set of myths have supported limitations on Black women, but also have affirmed Black women. Ruffin outlines this duality of myths labeling one as "Myths are stories that we remember about what our world is, how it came to be, how we came to be, what we want from it, and finally about what our future might be" (Ruffin 2010:114), and the opposite being destructive myths. Similar to the acknowledgement of what makes Black thought radical, myths are the sharing of history, stories and affirming identity and value. Myths and narratives are important because they precede judgement about ability and relevance. A destructive myth about Black women is that they are irrational in their judgment. A myth like this can color perceptions about a Black woman-led organization, their programming, and their financial responsibility. This myth does not need to be said out loud to anyone to have disastrous impact on the community that a BFEL serves. On the other hand, there are myths that affirm who BFEL are, and their relevance within the urban environment.

Another myth of Black women that lead, is that they are domineering. This is something that most Black women have heard, and there are people that go through a lot of effort to structure their leadership style to counter the impression of over dominance. This myth has also been linked to defeminizing Black women, that because of their domineering style they are

genderless. In my observations I did witness leaders that may be labeled as "a lot", or "type A", strong leaders. However, I observed that these leaders maintained a small inner council that helped to shape their leadership. The inner council shaped direction, priorities, and affirmed the dominant leader, but looked to the leader to package that message in a way that compels people and assures those that are under this leadership that they are a confident leader. An interesting analysis would be to view this leadership style outside of the Black women-led organization. Within the organization there are certain lenses that this leader does not have to contend with, she does not have to be compared to white men, or white women, nor does she have to shrink her power to conform to a patriarchal system. Her service is her strong leadership, the clear vision and support of her council that lead to urban environmental stewardship.

As Claudia Jones urged for the end of the neglect of Black women, these women are shifting narratives of desertion to listening specifically to the needs and considerations of Black women in urban Connecticut. They have countered what, and who, the nation has historically viewed as professional, expert and leader. They have chosen to do this through uplifting each other and through creating programs, forming networks, and developing nonprofits that center Black women and girls.

There are many myths that are not spoken about BFEL, which makes addressing them a challenge, however, through cultivating who informs our environmental work we address many myths. Dr. Tressie McMillian Cottom states this in her book, *Thick*, that Black women are not the solution to the country's problems, there are narratives around that idea also, but that their views have not been taken seriously within professional and academic spaces. Although she was not referencing the environmental field, I believe that her sentiments fit for BFEL also. Dr. Cottom is referring to political economists' network of influence, she chooses a columnist and decides to research their twitter follows to understand who this columnist chooses to be informed by through that platform. She found that for several columnists they had 6 Black women that they follow within their hundreds of follows. She goes on to say that this pattern says a lot about who they choose to take seriously within their field.

More than that, it would say who you have to engage to be taken seriously. As being taken seriously becomes a form of reputational capital in a culture where reputation is like the Bitcoin of status cultures, being taken seriously is real work. The royal "we" take our cues about what ideas matter from whom we must recognize before we ourselves can matter. Historically these kinds of fine-grained status distinctions were hard to parse. You sense that here was some mono-culture your own culture brushed up against as you

tried to extract what you needed from those around you for your survival and flourishing" (Cottom 2018:211-2)

This is a challenge for every professional, within political economics and also within environmental sciences. My research pool is actively choosing who will influence their thoughts about the urban environment, Black community, and Black female leadership. For many that fit with in the BFEL profile, they are often the only within a meeting, or an office and when they get to choose what organizations to partner with, to network with and to inform their thoughts they are seeking out other Black women within the environmental field. Therefore, the Black environmentalist network in Connecticut was formed (BEAM), to create a more direct line of connection for those that are within or in proximity to the environmental field.

Many of the BFEL's I interviewed spoke of a careful curation of their partnerships and their public image. They spoke of the fragility of their reputation as Black women, that society and the field would not afford them mistakes or partners that are reckless. For one interviewee this detail shaped partnerships she made in her work and the decisions she made in her private like, like protesting this summer in support of Black Lives Matter. This is her response:

A mentor of mine said this frequently, 'all I have is my name and my word'. And so, I have worked so tremendously hard to build the reputation that I have. And it is everything to me. I truly pride myself... even if we disagreed, I feel pretty confident in saying that most of the people that have worked with me would have something positive to say about that experience. And that has been very intentional, and it has taken decades worth of work. And now the older I am, and the more experience that I have, I am more refined in continuing my success, I am not willing to jeopardize that for someone else's carelessness or recklessness or insincerity, or, you know, misguidedness. I am not willing to jeopardize that. Because what took, you know, thirty some-odd years to build can be torn down with one wrong affiliation in a day. And it is not going to take a day to rebuild it. So, I am not willing to jeopardize that. I am very particular about who I consider partners.

For many BFEL's this is a familiar sentiment, one that has shaped how these women lead, and how much risk they take on in their programs. This type of scrutiny is linked to the domineering myth about Black women, their reputation as leaders and the future ability to shape the urban environment is at risk.

Black urban female environmental leadership looks different. The label "radical" diminishes the importance of Black female leadership to an inconvenience and a highlighting of Black women's natural inability to conform to white ideals. Radical expressions are self-

determination and narrative setting desires. The women that I interviewed each are setting new narratives of the role of Black women in Connecticut. These women are advocating for new programs in urban areas led by the community, are seeking civil rights legislation, are finding resources for their community to thrive. Black female leaders are protecting their power through careful partnership and creating spaces that support their leadership and Black community. Black women are lifting up each other and the environmental leadership of women like them. Women like Rae Wynn-Grant, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rue Mapp, Zora Neale Hurston, the Black women that participated in this research and me.

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CONCLUSION

Although conducting research during a global pandemic was difficult there were, for me, advantages to doing this research in this current moment. Participants of this study, once in the conversation, were a lot more willing to discuss complicated issues that they have seen in their urban environmental work, in their career and in society. There was a sense of urgency to the conversation and a need to share with someone how they are connecting the things they are living through within their field and the fear and terror living as a Black person in America.

The social distancing and limits to connecting with people outside of existing networks was a real challenge as I aimed to conduct this ethnographic work. The participants of this study are not monolithic, each had unique views, and each created their own boundaries to keep themselves and their close community safe. Beyond the scope of this study, I believe the study of humans and society will have to change to demonstrate respect for the collective experience of the global pandemic, and the link created between communion and risk. We as researchers should not rush back to the way things were, but instead to find new ways to do this work and document how it is changing our world. This will present the social scientist with a new challenge of assessing the impact of the pandemic on culture; what is lost and what has been formed in response to this shared experience.

Urban environmental stewardship often looks less like an environmental practice and more like politics, activism, organizing, and mindful development. Urban land has become a space for politics and economic development and has neglected the people. Urban conservation and rethinking land stewardship to include inhabited land, concreted land, and previously contaminated land as nature is a practice that is desperately needed. The devaluation of urban land is an extension of devaluing those relegated to urban land, Black, brown, and poor people. Through forcing value onto the land one can start the process of valuing people. Participants shared their belief that through investing in processes that instill value and dignity into urban Connecticut, new narratives will be developed about urban Black identity that can lead to a new vision of the future. This can be done through zoning. Bold zoning could include rezone all urban land to highly protected area, requiring land uses to come into compliance with standards of protection that conservation protected spaces have.

When urban environmentalism is done in a people honoring manor, it resists urban land exploitation, development for profit gains, and resisting environmental hazards for the greater good of those outside of the city. Black female environmental leaders in Connecticut are keeping a pulse on the condition of the community and the care of our State. Through recognition of their work, we see a radical leadership that paves a way for resiliency into the future. These women form a unique space in the field that should be acknowledged, valued, and supported.

SIGNATURES

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