

BLACK THOUGHT PROJECT

Lessons on Centering
Blackness



Photo by Bethanie Himes

**Black thought is sacred.
Worthy of protection.
A privilege to witness and receive.
Unadulterated. Authentic.**

***Can we make the world a sanctuary
for Black thought?***

**BLACK
THOUGHT
PROJECT**
CENTERING THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

Introduction

When people living in the U.S. hear “build a wall” they may have flashbacks to a presidency we’d all like to forget. But for the last few years, I have been building giant walls in cities across the US. Walls not of exclusion, but of expression. Walls that gave people a place to put their hopes and practice living a dream of right-relationship to each other, which so often feels impossible.

Walls that only Black people were allowed to write on.

Walls protected by nonBlack people.

Walls drenching city blocks in affirmations of love for ourselves and each other, some standing 8 feet high and 48 feet long.

Walls that became sites of reflection, meditation, healing, connection, rapturous joy and ancestral reverence.

Walls that stood as living testaments to the radical idea that our communities, indeed our greater societies, can **Center Blackness**: that we can protect, witness, and honor Black people; understanding our experiences as wisdom for the world’s healing, our thriving as the foundation of a harmonious planet. And that we can feel our way there, that our bodies can experience a different way to be in relation to Blackness and in that knowing, create cultures and systems that feel that way, too.

This simple experiment, **The Black Thought Project**, has a big vision: to make the world a sanctuary for Black thought, Black expression, Black people. And in so doing, eradicating the anti-blackness that lives in our minds, bodies, relationships, cultures, and structures so we may all live liberated.

I started the Black Thought Project as a way to experiment with Centering Blackness in the wild, on our streets, in our communities. I wanted people to **feel** what it is like to be in right-relationship to Blackness. For Black people to reflect on our own lives and perspectives knowing we are being **protected**, not threatened or considered a threat; **witnessed**, not profiled, judged or surveilled; our expressions **honored**, not commodified or exploited. For us to be in our joy and our healing in public without shame or fear.

I wanted nonBlack people to practice protecting Black people and our sacred experiences FIRST. To see what it feels like to witness themselves in an environment where they are not the center, to honor and see themselves in relationship to Blackness— Black joy, pain, dreams, desires— without the need to co-opt, pathologize, stifle, or make it in any way about them. And from *that* place, to



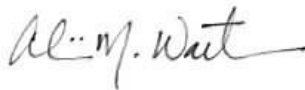
Black Thought Project creator, Alicia M. Walters at the first activation in Oakland, CA.

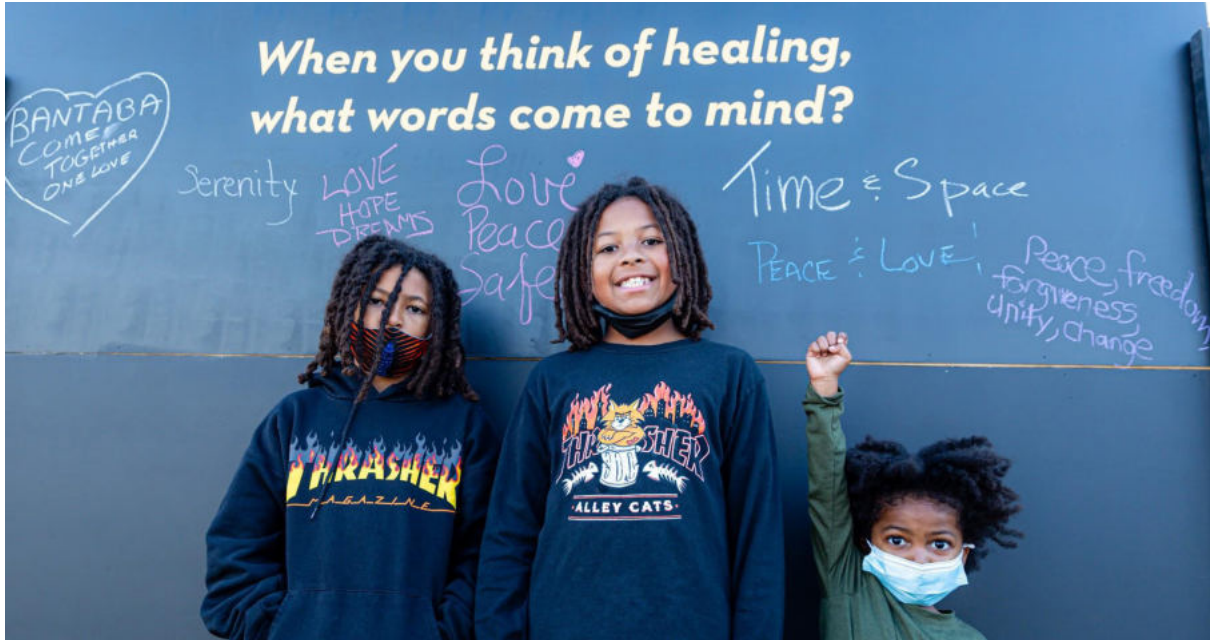
listen and learn what Black folx think about who we are, where we are and where we want to be as a society, to uncover power narratives and solutions that put Black people's humanity, wellness, and visions at the center.

In just 4 years, I have done all that and then some. And we're just getting started. The Black Thought Project has activated 15 Black Thought Walls in 4 cities across the U.S., in deep partnership with over 25 organizations, engaging thousands of people of all races, and documenting over 1,500 responses from Black people. Amidst that near constant mode of collaboration and activation, there is rarely time to reflect and make meaning of the impact this project has had. I am offering this report as evidence of the impact of Centering Blackness in public. The Black Thought Project is but one simple experiment that shows what is possible, how we might live with each other, what narratives and beliefs we might live by when we simply create the space for Black folx to be ourselves, draw on our bountiful experiences and vision the world that loves and cares for us.

This report offers a topline taste of the Black Thought Project's special sauce, our impact, results and where we want to go from here.

In Black love,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Al. M. Wait". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.



Black Thought Walls are accessible across generations, welcoming children to draw, write and express however they see fit. Photo by Bethanie Hines.

Origins + Purpose

What happens when we Center Blackness in public—when we experience and define the world and our own lives through the complexity of Black experiences?

What happens when we honor Blackness—when we respect the thoughts and experiences of a people who the world has coveted and feared—tried so desperately to emulate and so deliberately attempted to exterminate?

What would it take to create a sacred public space and time in which Blackness is not threatened but guaranteed safety, refuge, and protection?

These are the questions that gave rise to the [Black Thought Project](#). Created by [The Maven Collaborative's](#) Centering Blackness Fellow [Alicia M. Walters](#), the Black Thought Project creates sanctuaries for Black expression and Black people. Our interactive community-based art installations invite Black people into a protected space where they can reflect and connect; sharing what they love about themselves, their experiences of the world and visions for themselves, their families, communities and societies at large.

The Black Thought Project is committed to Centering Blackness in public, with our bodies, in our communities, in real time. In a society built squarely on anti-blackness, it is only in Centering Blackness that those foundational beliefs and systems can be transformed.



Many of us in social justice movements rely heavily on telling compelling stories to activate people's empathy toward our causes. Yet it's clearly not enough to have good and powerful messaging, sympathetic characters or a heart wrenching story. We know that having **lived experience** with an issue is more than enough to not only expose injustice, but to make people dedicate their lives to theirs *and* their fellow humans' liberation. **That is what the Black Thought Project aims to do—create a temporary alternative world, a container in which Black people feel safe in their bodies, among other people, safe enough to be vulnerable and write about their experiences and visions for all to see while nonBlack people have a lived experience of being in right-relationship to Black people and their expressions.** An experience in which multiracial communities practice protecting, witnessing and honoring Black people together in real time. Black folk contain liberatory narratives for all of society to live by. Creating an environment where Black people are safe and free enough to truly express their visions from a place of self and communal love, and then blanketing those thoughts for all to witness and honor, is one way we plant seeds of narratives that eradicate anti-blackness.

Centering Blackness in this way does not just happen; not in our lives, our collaborations, not on just any random chalkboard put up on a street corner. It takes an intentional commitment from a community willing to experiment, imagine, learn, take risks, trust each other and keep trying knowing anti-blackness will not disappear overnight, but Centering Blackness is absolutely worth throwing down for. A crucial aspect of a Black Thought Project activation is to establish specific rules and roles for people of all races so that they can collectively practice Centering Blackness.

The Black Thought Project combines and traverses disciplines to be simultaneously a social experiment, somatic activation, healing ritual, community-based participatory research, narrative and culture shift. In equal measure, this is the recipe for transforming anti-blackness in our personal lives and communities.

There are a few hypotheses that the Black Thought Project is testing:

1. If a multiracial community can practice and feel what Centering Blackness looks and feels like in their bodies, in public, they will believe it is possible and have the tools to practice this in other areas of their lives.
2. If Black people are given protected space and time to reflect on questions that center their inherent dignity and worth, then their genuine perspectives and feelings will come through and inform or be the basis of narratives that are inherently uplifting and liberatory for Black people and us all.
3. If nonBlack people are enlisted in the effort and provided clear, actionable roles in Centering Blackness, they will show up and participate in a way that furthers Black people's liberation and their own.

The experiment that is the Black Thought Project, hinges on Centering Blackness and we have a perspective on just what that means.



"I haven't seen my mother this engaged and joyful in months!" An elder finds delight at a Black Thought Project activation in Harlem, NY. Photo by Bethanie Hines.

The Why and What of Centering Blackness

As happens with our movement language, the concept of “centering” can be so used as to render it meaningless. Because of and despite those who may be overusing or co-opting the language of centering, it is important that we give it specificity and meaning for we are not abandoning, but doubling down on the concept. In short, Centering Blackness is natural, it is fundamental to the origins of our collective humanity and in this day and age it is necessary because anti-blackness is ubiquitous.

Anti-Blackness at the Root

For the last several centuries, anti-blackness—the personal, structural, systemic, and cultural dehumanizing of people who are Black—has been foundational to the structure and function of society. Race and racism were created as a way to justify the oppression of Black people while uplifting and building the power of whiteness and those in closer proximity to it. That racial hierarchy has been adopted and enforced by societies across the globe alongside colonization, patriarchy, and racialized capitalism.

In the U.S. we can look at any system or institution from housing to education, voting to immigration, the economy to the media and see how they were built without regard for Black

people's humanity, to exploit us and ensure our suffering and demise. To justify and maintain these structures, mainstream culture overtly and subtly teaches everyone to believe Black people are inferior, worthy of exploitation and are a threat to both individuals and society at large.

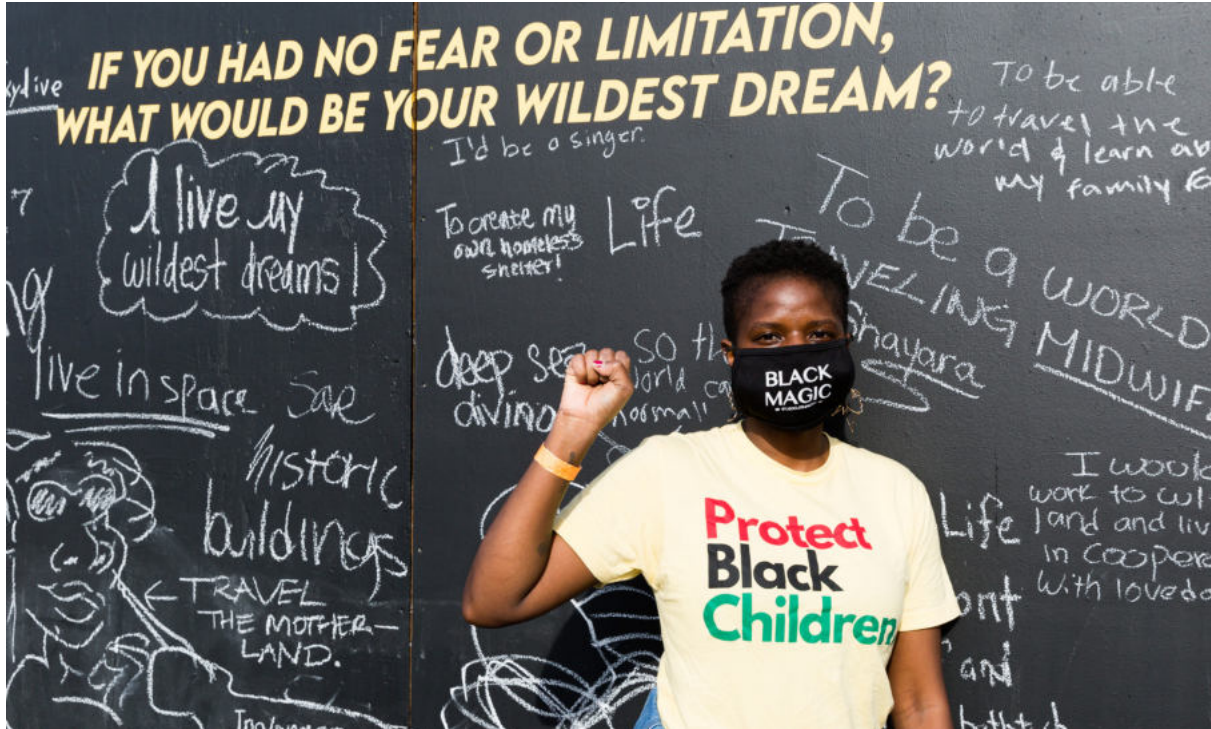
It is not only nonBlack people who struggle with beliefs that deny Black people's humanity. Black folk are not immune to the toxicity of anti-blackness. Passed through our nervous systems to the next generation, conditioned in a society that does not value us, we have learned to survive this onslaught in myriad ways— turning on ourselves and each other, participating in systems and cultures of harm. Anti-black conditioning permeates our psyches and bodies in ways we are not often given space to explore and heal from. In this way, the social order is maintained when anti-blackness lives in everyone's minds and bodies and permeates our belief systems, dictating how we relate to ourselves, each other, and the systems that keep societal hierarchies in place. We, too, must shift our beliefs about ourselves and each other. **We all must learn to practice Centering Blackness.**

Those of us working to break down this anti-black world and establish one rooted in love and care for Black people often come up against societal narratives that prevent us from passing policies and creating systems that would benefit Black people. And even when policies are passed that seem to be going in the right direction, those beliefs remain and prevent the policy's fair and equitable implementation in ways that would benefit Black people, or result in backlashes that whip us further back than the meager but meaningful progress made. **Without changing our individual and collective beliefs about Blackness and Black people, Black folk as a whole will not experience the safety and freedom that is our birthright.**

With anti-blackness at the center and the foundation of our current structures and systems, anything less than Centering Blackness, allows anti-blackness to persist and prevents Black people's full liberation, which prevents equity for all. **When we Center Blackness, we acknowledge this fundamental harm and hold at the center of our inquiry what repair is needed and what possibilities are potentiated.**

The question that guides the Black Thought Project is how to create lived experiences where people can come to know Centering Blackness as a transformative and liberatory practice for all. Our bodies as Black and nonBlack people must come to know that a world where Black people's humanity is protected, witnessed and honored is possible.

This is what the public experiment that is the Black Thought Project sets out to do: create lived experiences of Centering Blackness so we can come to know it is possible and generate the narratives, belief systems, practices and cultures to get us there.



Black Thought Youth Wall at Liberation Park, Oakland, CA. Photo by Bethanie Hines.

Black Thought Project Tenets: PROTECT, WITNESS, HONOR

The following details our process for co-creating a Black Thought Wall, what we've learned along the way about how to Center Blackness in collaborations and in the wild of our streets as well as the multidimensional wisdom from the precious Black folk who shared their perspectives with us.

The Black Thought Project practices three specific tenets of Centering Blackness and invites all participating to do so as well: protect, witness and honor.

Protect

First and foremost, participants and passersby are called upon to PROTECT the Black people using the wall. Make sure they are supported. Protect the wall itself as a sacred space of Black expression and make sure people who are not Black are not writing on the wall. If someone notices nonBlack people writing on the wall, our team intervenes, explains and asks them to remove what they've written. This is ideally and importantly a role for nonBlack thought protectors to take on. This is an important way we are re-learning roles in a world that centers Blackness.

For too long, Black people have had to risk our safety to protect ourselves and each other. Being able to use the wall freely knowing nonBlack people have our backs and will use their words and bodies in protection of us and our sacred space is an important part of the new learning and practicing together.



People write on and witness each other during the Black Thought Project activation at the Oakland Museum of California. Photo by Bethanie Hines

Witness

The second role of participants and thought protectors alike is to WITNESS. Witnessing involves an introspective, thoughtful curiosity. We ask that people witness the participating Black folx, how they are navigating the space and what they are sharing. Witness them as they are writing, sending loving, nonjudgmental energy. To witness is also to affirm in a way that does not encroach upon another's experience. Perhaps most importantly and least practiced in our current society is to witness YOURSELF. What thoughts or feelings are coming up for you in this experience? What reactions do you notice yourself having to different sentiments people are writing on the wall? To being able to write or not? What judgments might you be making? What realizations are you having? For Black folx, it is also important that we witness ourselves and each other. What does it feel like to know I am being protected? Have I ever felt safe in public? What does it feel like to share my thoughts with authenticity and

vulnerability? What am I witnessing others write and how do I relate? What am I learning about myself and us? In this whole experience, what is coming up for me?

Honor

Finally, thought protectors, and truly EVERYONE participating is asked to HONOR: the Black people sharing their thoughts, the words offered, the experience as a whole. Honor what is being created here. If we approach this experience with reverence, we will get more out of it. We can make it mean something for us, for our communities. We can build on it, we can learn from it. We can create curricula from it! When we come with the energy and intention to honor, we make what is happening mean something, it sinks in and becomes part of us, not simply something we are

bystanders in. Honor requires us to slow down, take in, meditate on the experience and find our own way to integrate it into our lives.

We need non-Black people to commit to protecting, witnessing and honoring the Black people who interact with the wall and the thoughts they share.

To intervene when other non-Black people mistakenly or intentionally attempt to use the wall outside of how it is intended by writing on the wall or otherwise disrespecting it. **We need non-Black folx who will do the work of centering Blackness even when Black people aren't there to request or force you to do so. This is part of how the experience is honored.**





Photo of Madison, WI Co-Creators by Amadou Kromah.

Process: Centering Blackness in Ideation and Creation

How do we create lived experiences where people can come to know Centering Blackness as a transformative and liberatory practice for all?

Every aspect of the Black Thought Project considers this question. Because the Black Thought Project is an experiment in Centering Blackness, then we must bring it into every aspect of the work. We cannot offer what we do not have, so if we want to create experiences in the wild where Black people feel safe, seen, affirmed, and whole, then the co-creative space must be the same.

Conditions

Before we agree to collaborate or create a Black Thought Wall, we make sure that this is something that is for the primary benefit of the Black community and can be held and nurtured by Black folk without overextending their capacity. The Black Thought Project has been approached by well-meaning white people who want to do a wall where it would be related to a grant deliverable or a way for white people to say they are “doing something” about anti-blackness, exclusion, or racism in general at their organization, or even worse just something that makes white people feel good about themselves. We do not agree to participate, facilitate or lend the Black Thought Project name and ethos to a project that does not have the explicit intention of Centering Blackness with the participation of Black people at their will and agency. When the conditions are right— there is a ready, enthusiastic group of Black people who know and are connected to their community desiring this type of transformative experience— the Black Thought Project will participate, often establishing a group of co-creators.

Co-Creation

It has become clear what it takes for a group to Center Blackness in practice, and co-create this experience together. When we Center Blackness, we are necessarily working at the root. We know that anti-blackness is at the root of dominant structures, systems and cultures. The word “radical” literally means, “at the root.” Working radically for us means to acknowledge and uproot anti-blackness where it exists AND to put down new roots that Center Blackness for everyone’s freedom. It can be challenging and we don’t always know the way forward. We have come to understand that in order to Center Blackness an individual and/or group must be willing to embody:

- **Radical experimentation:** departing from the status quo and taking risks.
- **Radical empathy:** building or nurturing a foundation of trust, compassion, and grace for self and others.
- **Radical imagination:** the capacity and willingness to envision a different, more human way of being.
- **Radical faith:** sitting with discomfort and uncertainty and continuing to move forward.
- **Radical transformation:** a commitment to personal, collective, and systemic change that remakes oneself, institutions and foundations.
- **Radical authenticity and honesty:** truth-telling and showing up aware of oneself with willingness to be seen.
- **Radical accountability:** engaging in processes of reckoning, repair, and deepened relationship.

When the most important question is what would most support Black people to show up in this way, the structure of a collaboration is different. We ask ourselves different questions and prioritize different elements of the piece. We must ensure the building of this Black Thought Wall or installation is first for the benefit of Black folx and they will be able to safely and joyfully participate. We do not force. We take the time to listen— to our intuition, each other, partners, community, our knowing within. We consider what would be best for the Black community we are centering.

Centering Black People’s Safety and Wellbeing FIRST

When you are Centering Blackness in an art installation, choosing the location requires specific considerations. For too long, Black people have had to put ourselves in harm’s way just to exist. When considering a location for a wall, it is imperative to know the history of the location as well as any recent actions that may have occurred. Questions we regularly ask ourselves while location scouting include: What is the Black community’s relationship to this place? Did anything happen here historically that may prevent Black people from feeling safe? Does law enforcement have an active presence here that may intimidate or threaten the safety of Black people? Is there a desire for Black people to lay claim to this space in the midst of or in response to displacement?

The Black Thought Project installs Black Thought Walls in places where Black people currently live, love, frequent, congregate, laugh, wait, wonder, learn, care and are cared for— spaces where Black people may have been shut out or threaten displacement. We invite public and private entities to transform their places into sanctuaries of Black thought by installing a space that will be protected as a sacred space for Black thought.

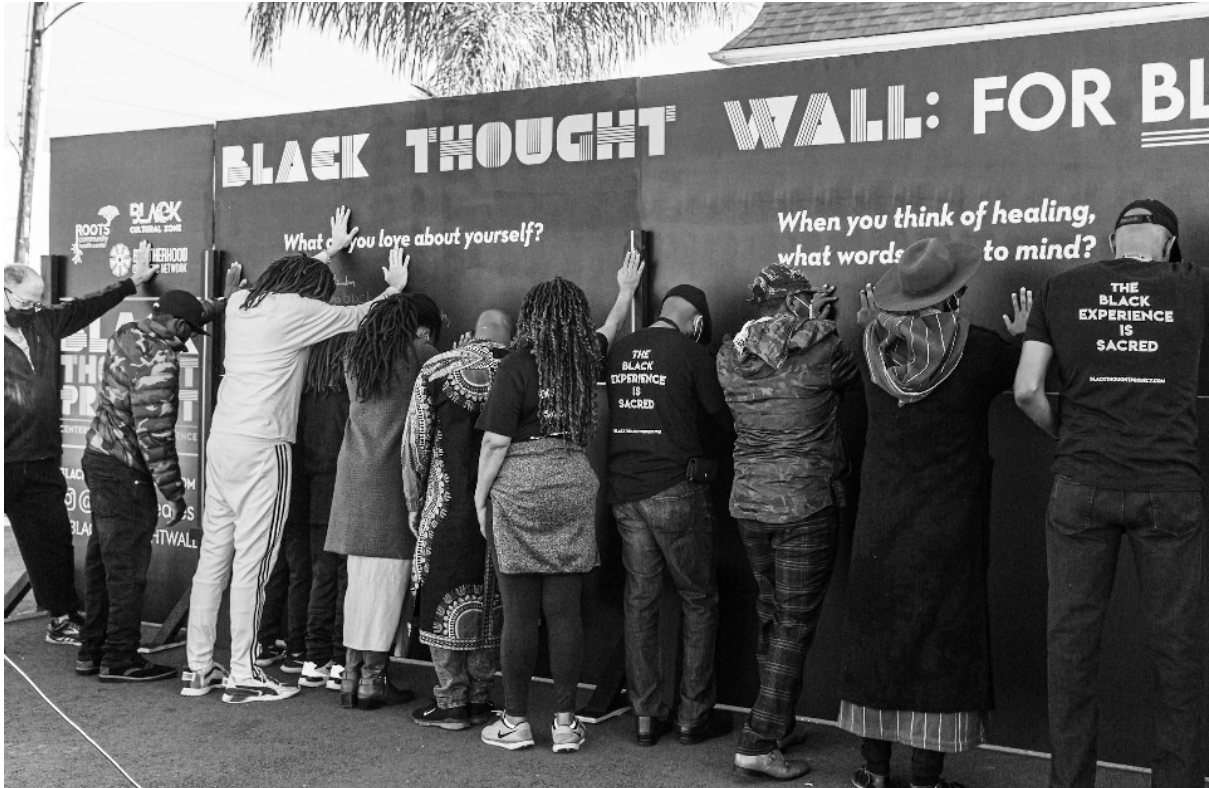


Participants in the second Black Thought Wall activation in Madison, WI, dedicate the wall to the Black community. Photo by Amadou Kromah.

Thought Protectors

As a part of the process of creating a wall, thought protectors are trained—those who will fulfill the role of ensuring nonBlack people do not write on the wall, intervening when necessary and also engaging nonBlack people in the purpose of the project. They get a full explanation on Centering Blackness, on the purpose of the project and what it means and looks like to show up in a way that centers Black people. They are facilitated through real-life scenarios we have experienced at various walls and they share about how they would respond in a way that centers Blackness with coaching from our team. Centering Blackness means we acknowledge there is no one way to go about things, our conditions are constantly changing and we respect everyone's lived experiences. It is part of our training to become present with what the moment brings and slow down to consider what Centering Blackness might look like in that moment.

Centering Blackness requires us to reexamine how we think, feel and act at a fundamental level. We cannot rely upon our conditioned responses when facilitating a Black Thought Wall or living a life that Centers Blackness. When considering how to act, one is required to slow down and consider multiple possibilities.



Black folx bless the Black Thought Wall during the opening ritual in deep East Oakland, CA. Photo by Bethanie Hines.

Protecting, not policing

When activating walls in urban settings, the question of vandalism frequently comes up. “What happens if someone vandalizes the wall?” First, we notice how anti-blackness is baked into the question—the idea that Black people can’t have and don’t deserve nice things because we don’t take care of them; that Black people are criminals and vandals. When murals or other art pieces go up in white neighborhoods, are the same questions asked? At the Black Thought Project we do not blame, shame or make assumptions about Black folx. We honor all our expressions and if a Black person wants to make their presence known by putting their name or “tag” on the wall, we see that as their expression. This wall is about Black folx expressing, not about controlling our expression. It is about the community who activates this wall and we make room for communal agency, repair and self-determination. When we have questions about whether someone is Black, we approach them with compassion and openness knowing that if the person *is* Black, they have undoubtedly endured all manner of questioning and assumptions. We are not here to police identities, but to protect Black people in all their hues and experiences.

All of this is an experiment. It’s all information. **We are trying to understand what it takes for a community to create and maintain a sacred public space and time where Black people are expressing.** If the wall gets tagged, vandalized, even stolen, that is information about whether a community can protect such a space. Who rebuilds it? Perhaps the community didn’t value this as a space of expression. Perhaps it felt like outsiders attempting to exploit Black people’s expression. Perhaps there wasn’t enough trust, relationship-building, or organizing to make this something the community was invested in. We witness, honor and learn from it all.

Determining the Questions

One critical and unique aspect of Black Thought Walls is how we pose the questions. We intentionally craft questions that center Black people on many levels: first Black folks are encouraged to CENTER, meaning go within and explore themselves from a place of love. We are not asking folks to be outside their bodies or in others' perceptions of them. The first question is one that centers them in love of self. From there, they can then reflect on their dreams, desires or experiences. But first, we must love and appreciate ourselves, even before we consider others, even our families or communities. The rest of the questions must also engage Black folks from a love and appreciation of Black folks, our communities, legacies and possibilities. We are not here to drag each other. Society does enough of that for us. We are here to heal, transform, to look within at our own resilient beauty, what has been instilled in us, our unique dreams and desires and express those for our communities to see.



The joy is palpable at Black Thought Project installations. We need to be seen in all our facets. It is healing to witness young Black men in their sweet joy. Harlem 2023. Photo by Bethanie Hines.

Activation

A Black Thought Project activation MUST feel like home, healthy family celebrations, like feeling seen and free. Black Thought Project activations are full of music, art, joy, poetry, dance, loud conversations, quiet contemplations, double-dutch, patties, hot tea, a cool drink, and warm hugs. Black people come from everywhere, but no matter where we are in the world, we want the Black Thought Project to feel like and reflect a place we are deeply welcomed and seen and celebrated. We open with ritual and dedication, there is music flowing throughout, and conscious yet easy-going facilitation that engages participants. There is an active role for everyone to play in a Black Thought Project activation.



Respected elder, Baba Greg Hodge gives thanks and honor to the ancestors and the land in a Black Thought Wall opening ritual in East Oakland, CA. Photo by Bethanie Hines

Lessons Learned

Over the course of the 15 activations, we have learned much about how to create public spaces that Center Blackness. Below are several of our lessons learned.

- ▶ **Black people have been conditioned to be skeptical when something is for us and need encouragement, and to build trust in us as facilitators in order to participate.**
 - ▶ **White people have been conditioned to think everything is for them and need reining in through direct and clear intervention.**
 - ▶ **Black people have had to sacrifice our safety and wellbeing to protect ourselves and our spaces, so at the Black Thought Walls (and we would argue, in life) it is the role of nonBlack people to intervene.**
 - ▶ **When two or more are gathered in Centering Blackness, all beautiful, healing, joyful, nourishing things come.**
 - ▶ **Leave space and time for people to take it all in.** This is a meditative experience for many. Taking in what Black people love about themselves, our dreams for our lives and our communities is a deeply nourishing experience.
- We need agreements in advance with venues about how long the words and the wall will remain standing and permission/agreements with how to document and ritually wash it.** Institutions also need to be guided in how to Center Blackness, even Black-led organizations
- ▶ **What is written on the wall is just the beginning. The depth comes in the conversations about what people wrote and why. That is where the experience expands, deepens and takes on new meaning.**
 - ▶ **Black Thought Walls open up conversations and possibilities for deeper community organizing. They become safe gathering spaces, ritual spaces and places of intergenerational connection.**



These lessons proved true through all the activations. And with each unique experience, more lessons are being added to the list.



Narrative Analysis

At its core, Black Thought Project is a narrative change experience. What each wall uplifts are seeds to formulate new narratives about Black people that are based on the actual thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams of Black people which serve to counter the barrage of harmful, dehumanizing narratives white supremacy and the patriarchy have currently created about Black people.

Each Black Thought Project activation either has a clear theme or a set of topics that stem from a [Centering Blackness framework](#) which was written by Maven staff in collaboration with Dorian Warren from Community Change. It was during our time facilitating the Power Narrative Learning Community that we developed a set of *Power Narrative Criteria* which formed the basis of narratives we desired to explore in the wild. The idea for the Black Thought Project is to test these criteria and see if we could create a space where we Centered Blackness for Black folk to contemplate and generate narratives that Center Blackness from their own experiences. The seven themes of the Power Narrative Criteria show up in the topics the Black Thought Project explores today. When approaching the Power Narrative Criteria with Blackness at the center, the topics become expansive, spanning generations and blurring lines of I, we, me, they, us and them.

- **Individual Wholeness and Dignity**
 - What do you love about yourself?
 - What do you want for your precious Black life?

- **Collective Commitment and Power**
 - What is your hope for your community?
 - What stories of us do you long to see in the media?
 - Write the name of an ancestor whose spirit you want to call upon. What wisdom would they share with us?
 - Write the name of an ancestor you admire. What did their life teach you?

- **Repairing Harm**
 - When you think of healing what words come to mind?
 - What if this neighborhood were a place of healing?
 - What does your healing look like?

- **Rebuilding Trust and Relationships**
 - How do you heal from hurt or in the midst of hard times?
 - When do you feel most cared for by your loved ones?
 - What does a media that loves Black people look and feel like?

- **Redefining Safety and Threats**
 - What makes you feel safe?
 - What should leaders do to make sure ALL Black people are safe and supported?
 - Imagine a world where ALL Black people are without fear and limitation. Tell us about it.

- **Thriving and Liberation**
 - If you had no fear or limitation, what would you be or do/what would be your wildest dream?
 - What does a future with thriving Black people look and feel like?
 - What would the world be like if ALL Black people were truly free?
 - What are you celebrating that brought you to this moment of freedom?
 - What freedom do you want Black people to celebrate in the future?

- **Shared Abundance**
 - What is possible when ALL Black people are cared for?
 - What freedom do you want ALL Black people to experience and how are you contributing?

Thus far, the Black Thought Project has documented 1,500 responses across the 15 Black Thought Walls we have activated. We have also documented 60 audio and visual reactions and stories related to the experience and topics. Our team has analyzed the responses and found a set of themes and insights into how we as Black folx think about these topics in relation to our lives, families, communities, dreams and the societies in which we live. Our data encompasses not only what is written on the Black Thought Walls, but what is experienced and felt in an environment that Centers Blackness, one where our expression is considered and held as sacred. The learning, the power, lives off the wall. Across those 15 walls, themes of LOVE, SAFETY, HEALING, FREEDOM DREAMS, and

LEGACY are prominent. Within these themes we find seedlings for new narratives that continue to emerge from our activations. Much of what we are finding are things we as Black folx already know about ourselves and our communities, yet our greater societies do not. They are the secret sauce to how we have not only survived, but continued loving and creating, expanding and growing. They are the things we believe about ourselves while society remains unaware of who we truly are. Sharing these publicly on Black Thought Walls provides an opportunity for society to finally see us in the light in which we see ourselves.

LOVE

Most Black Thought Walls ask what Black folx love about ourselves. This is intentional as it is a key tenet of the Black Thought Project for us to be grounded in self-love as we contemplate the questions and engage. From this place, we can share our thoughts and visions. Our data on what Black folx love about ourselves says reems about who we are as a people, our essence despite and in the midst of all that has been taken from us and the lies told on us, to us. It is a miracle of our ancestors' and elders' doing to behold the love that remains, and for that, we give thanks. What and how we love is a testament to our character and is indelibly tied to legacy. Indeed love is our legacy.

Within the theme of love, we rejoice that so many Black folx indeed love EVERYTHING about themselves on all levels: their physicality, spirituality, interiority, skills and talents, ways of loving and being. Love of self is not limited to self, but expands to include community and ancestral legacy.



The Black Thought Project co-created the first Black Future Newsstand, which launched in Harlem, Juneteenth 2023. Photo by Bethanie Hines.

SAFETY

The time and context for this theme matters. We felt compelled to ask people about safety in June, 2020, not long after a series of brutally violent murders of Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd rocked us. We activated several Black Thought Walls that asked people in Oakland, California about safety over the following months, two walls focused on youth specifically and in support of The City of Oakland, Reimagining Safety Task Force. Safety is also a primary theme in the Black Thought Project's work in that we understand that Black people must first be protected, not threatened or considered a threat, in order to feel safe enough to express themselves in our installations, and to exist freely in the world.

Within the theme of safety, what emerged most prominently is that our connections to family and community, and specifically Black women make us feel most safe. At The Black Thought Project and within The Maven Collaborative, we are contemplating and experimenting with what it means to create an economy, indeed a society around Black Aunties. Often the center of our families and communities, the way auntiehood shows up creates safety, connection, shared wealth and nurturing. And yet for such a powerful role, Black women are systematically deprived, exploited and disregarded. It is critical that our systems and cultures acknowledge, support and trust Black women for our wisdom, inherent worth and critical role in our families and society. If it is us keeping folx safe, who is keeping us safe? We are. And often, at the expense of our own wellbeing. We are the safe house, the safety net and safe place to land in times of crisis. But no longer should we bear that alone or have it be taken advantage of. If we are the solution, we should be centered, regarded and supported as such.





HEALING

The Black Thought Project has activated two walls that asked Black folx specifically about their relationships to and perspectives around healing. Beyond those, the experience of participating itself is healing for many community members who engage with our installations. For respondents in our activations, healing necessarily involves our bodies, spiritual and therapeutic support, repair and accountability, and communities that care for us. What psychologists study and find about resilience is being exhibited during every one of our activations. Black folx at our activations are showing us that they have the somatic and communal resources to move through hard times. It may seem simple, but how we move our bodies and engage our communities is a deeply rooted spiritual technology that ignites our joy in order to heal. Instead of conducting cold surveys to uncover this powerful truth, we create nourishing, joyful, contemplative environments where people are safe and free enough to engage their own resources for healing.

FREEDOM DREAMS

A major theme in responses to the Black Thought Walls concerns dreams for individual and collective freedom and futures. This theme naturally arises because we have frequently asked about people's dreams for themselves, their communities and the world and because to be Black is to live in the past, present and future simultaneously. Many of us know it is our duty to dream because someone dreamt for us and here we are. We know it is our responsibility to envision a better future



for our descendants and those desires are held just under the surface, close to our hearts. This theme emerges showing us yet another thrival skill that has been passed down to us: the capacity to imagine. When asked what people would do without fear or limitation, so many dreamt of lives detached from wage labor, expressing themselves artistically. Unbound by financial stress, we see so much for ourselves. When entire city blocks are covered in our dreams, we hope others will see our dreams are not so different from their own, and just as much deserving of becoming reality.

LEGACY

Whether or not we asked explicitly about them Black folk across all of our activations shared important relationships with their ancestors, lineage and legacy; all are present with us at all times. To be Black is to live simultaneously in the past, present and future. We are here because someone before us survived, loved and lived on. We are actively involved in those coming up behind us and if we don't dream of us in the future, no one else will. Our legacy does not only become real when we pass on, it is in how we live and love every day. It is our inheritance. The themes that arose with regard to legacy are spread across and deeply intertwined with every theme and response. For participants in our activations, legacy goes beyond blood and we want not only our own kin to benefit from our lifetimes, but the whole. Those who came before us want us to be well. When we are in joy, loving ourselves and each other, they are in joy, their legacy is alive in us. Many who experience the walls, the beauty, vulnerability, visions and joy that are ever-present feel a sense of gratitude about seeing who we are in public. Our joy is palpable. Our joy is legacy.



Impact

In the four years since the Black Thought Project launched, we have activated 15 unique Black Thought Wall experiences in partnership with 35 organizations in 11 sites across 4 cities. We have worked with teams of dozens of co-creators, collaborators and artists and have trained dozens more thought protectors. The following is a synopsis of the impact these walls have had on the communities that have experienced these activations.

Impact: #1:

Multiracial communities came together to practice and feel what Centering Blackness looks and feels like in their bodies, in public, believed that it is possible to continue this practice in other areas of their life and have the tools to do so.

The myriad teams of co-creators, co-stewards and thought protectors who have participated in the process have shared how powerful it is to be a part of and the importance of maintaining the walls, making them permanent and engaging them over and over in communities.

“We are creating a space for community to express, to touch their own healing, and to engage.”

“I’ve been able to look at the Black Thought Wall. The feeling I get is I have to stop, take it in, the whole wall. Have it be a celebration of who we are.”

“Amazing to see everything come together before us. Seeing the wall in person. Everybody face to face. Getting to safely hug, fellowship. Felt like family, love, community. Beautiful. The message behind it was beautiful. Felt organic and real. Just alive. I REALLY enjoyed it.”



“My favorite part was walking around the community to speak to folks who live in Sobrante Park and invite them to join us. Even though not everyone was willing to do that, just hearing their responses to the questions, their embodiment of the community, whether that was their personal history and how their whole family had lived in Sobrante Park. People were sharing their visions for how to heal the world. We gave them space knowing even if you don’t write on the wall right now, it’ll be here for a while.”

“It was very powerful hearing the drums from the activation while we were walking around the neighborhood. It caught the attention of the people. If we continue to be consistent and just show up, it will encourage people to come through. It’s at such a beautiful location, people will keep passing by it and see it. Just the existence of the wall in that space is going to make a big difference. Can’t wait for the next one it was such a beautiful moment.”

“I wish for the wall to be a catalyst for building connections and community around something positive because we know community comes together around challenges or issues or not at all.”

“My wish for the wall is it can bring community together and let Black folks know they belong in that space and are welcome to be in that space.”

“This could be the start of something that we missed out on in other generations, but are catching up on in the generations to come.”



Impact #2

Black people were given protected space and time to reflect on questions that center their inherent dignity and worth. This led to the creation of new narratives that inherently uplift and liberate Black people and us all.

We set out to test whether the narrative threads we developed resonated and how they might naturally emerge and be expanded upon by Black people in protected public space. We have found such a depth, richness and expansion of our narrative threads. They are living and breathing in communities for all to see and explore. Better than any billboard, there are walls across cities that are expressing the beauty, vibrancy and resilience in being Black and the endless, irresistible possibilities when we are free to be and to dream. The hope is that with permanent locations, we can continue creating these narratives and live into the realities we imagine. If we see us through this light, if our communities protect these futures we dream of, if our communities hold space for us and believe in us as we do in ourselves, perhaps we can begin to see cultural shifts that center Blackness instead of threaten and diminish us.

Impact#3

When nonBlack people are enlisted in the effort and provided clear, actionable roles in Centering Blackness, they show up and participate in a way that furthers Black people's liberation and their own.

Centering Blackness is everyone's work. A critical aspect of the Black Thought Project is training nonBlack people to be protectors of Black people and our sacred spaces of expression. Throughout the co-creative process, we created multiracial spaces that Center Blackness so people can practice in their lives what this looks and feels like. So often, we have heard from nonBlack participants that this work of protecting, witnessing and honoring Black folk "feels right." Indeed it is our intention to



NonBlack people practice protecting Black folx in a Black Thought Project activation in Harlem. Photo by Bethanie Hines.

bring people into right-relationship with Blackness and each other. None of us *really* wants to live with the dis-ease that is anti-blackness. We want a way out. Deep down, we want to feel aligned with the whole of humanity. We want to heal. And so many folks want something to *do*. The active practices of protecting, witnessing and honoring within the experiment of a Black Thought Project installation give people a way to take action while also shifting their internal landscapes. One wall does not a community make. One wall does not do the job of Centering Blackness, but it is a site of *practice*. One which people can slow things down, connect to what they're noticing and feeling and have people to process with.

We have heard from many nonBlack participants that participating in the co-creation and activation of these walls has changed the way to parent their children, facilitate meetings, walk down the street. This is the goal: that we are providing a lived experience that shows another way of being that can then be implemented in one's daily life.

"I get it. This is the first time I've actually practiced protecting Black people. It feels right."

Future Visions: where we go from here

Expansion and Cultural Placekeeping

With a strong proof of concept, we want to expand the Black Thought Project into more communities and create permanent spaces. We firmly believe that millions of people the world over must experience in our bodies what it means to Center Blackness and be rid of the anti-blackness that has hijacked our psyches and plagued our societies. We envision facilitating thousands of people at a time into practices of Centering Blackness and traveling the globe with this vision and practice. Wherever there are communities that harbor anti-Blackness, we want to activate Black Thought Walls. Anti-Blackness is global, therefore Centering Blackness must be as well. The narratives and beliefs about Black people's inferiority are rampant and live in our bodies. Wherever Black people are misunderstood, displaced, systemically harmed, there the Black Thought Project shall be. Wherever there are Black people with untapped wisdom, unexpressed dreams, unheard solutions, there should be Black Thought Walls inviting and protecting their expressions.

We envision co-creating and activating spaces focused on specific Black experiences that are too often silenced. We see activating walls for Black women, queer, trans and nonbinary Black folx, Black mothers, Black immigrants, Black folx in other countries, and more. For, we know that when the Black Thought Project works with a community, we are training people to make sure Black folx are protected. We welcome the opportunity to tailor trainings and experiences to ensure the most vulnerable Black people among us are protected, witnessed and honored in the ways that are most impactful for them and reflective of their inherent worth and power.

We are a small but mighty team and such expansion requires greater resourcing and support. With this being such a replicable project, we envision training communities to co-create their own Black Thought Walls, to train thought protectors and take on the sacred maintenance of these spaces.

Narrative Analysis and Adoption

The various Black Thought Project activations have garnered resonant and powerful narratives that could and should be flooding our movement fields. For too long Black folx' experiences have been boiled down to our traumas and not our possibilities, our survival and not our thriving. And yet, we as Black folx continue to dream, to create beautiful somethings from the crumbs society tosses our way. We are powerful creators, weaving our own webs of story and belief that keep the life blood and creativity running through our communal veins. This project has surfaced healing narratives that could set this society on its right path to overcoming anti-Blackness and so much of what gets in the way of collective liberation.

We see ourselves sharing these narratives, encouraging and supporting organizations and communities, elected officials and service providers to see *us* how we see ourselves when we love ourselves. To start uplifting narratives that reflect our power. We envision writing, publishing, speaking, organizing and training so that we as a collective people may begin to embody and practice living by them.



Conclusion

Centering Blackness is not a destination, rather a beautiful, transformative journey that brings forth endless possibilities of liberation and joy for all of us. The Black Thought Project offers a particular process in this journey where a group of multi-racial people can experience what Centering Blackness has to offer. Through art, music, laughter and connection, The Black Thought Project offers the world a living, breathing example of what it takes and means to do this work. Through this process of creating protected space for Black thought, participants are able to transport themselves into another way of being. While we have been able to measure some impact, we know that there is so much more we do not know yet in regards to the ripple effect this project can have in the world. We have been blessed to begin this journey and look forward to growing and learning more about how creating sanctuaries for Black thought out in the wild can help transform society.

To commission a Black Thought Wall in your community or to collaborate with the Black Thought Project, visit www.blackthoughtproject.com and fill out the contact form.

Acknowledgements + Partnerships

We are full of appreciation for the many people and institutions who have contributed to and supported this work from ideation through experimentation and documentation. It has been an honor to bring this idea to life in collaboration with the following individuals and organizations. From Deep East Oakland to South Madison to Harlem we are grateful to the communities who have practiced and committed to Centering Blackness in public.

Co-Conspirator

The Maven Collaborative

Collaborative Partners

African American Art and Culture Complex

Ajayi Lumumba Jackson

Alena Museum

Bayview-Hunters Point YMCA

Bethanie Hines Photography

Betti Ono Gallery

Black Cultural Zone

Brotherhood of Elders

Design Action Collective

Expecting Justice (University of California, San Francisco)

Free Press

Kemi Role

Khepera Batties

Kingston 11 Cuisine

Liberation Ventures

Madison Community Development Authority

Madison School district

Media 2070

New York Amsterdam News

Oakland Museum of California

Operation Fresh Start

Progress Center for Black Women

Policylink

Roots Community Clinic

Sobrante Park People's Advisory Committee

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

The Africa Center

Unclassified Design Group

Villager Mall (Madison, WI)

Wakanda Dream Lab

YWCA Madison

ZEAL Collaborative

Funders

Annie E. Casey Foundation

Borealis Philanthropy, Racial Equity in Journalism Fund

California Arts Council

City of Oakland Reimagining Safety Task Force

Kindle Project

Pivotal Ventures

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

San Francisco Human Rights Commission

**BLACK
THOUGHT
PROJECT**
CENTERING THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

**THE MAVEN
COLLABORATIVE**