To: MEV Faculty and Staff                   Date: April 16, 2018
From: SPR
Subject: Key Takeaways from Cohort 4 Baseline Interviews

This memo highlights key takeaways and recommendations from baseline interviews with the members of Cohort 4. Twenty-one interviews were conducted between February 14 and March 16, 2018. Each interview spanned 60-90 minutes and was summarized in notes and transcribed. In particular, this memo focuses on the experiences and impressions of Cohort 4 members that may have implications for the design of the second convening. It centers on the following core questions:

- How effectively are Cohort 4 members being brought into the MEV community, to both further the work of previous cohorts and build their own cohesiveness to do work together?
- What were the key takeaways and highlights from the first convening?
- What critical questions or recommendations do Cohort 4 members have for MEV faculty and staff?

Throughout the memo we have taken care to not quote any one cohort member more than once to illustrate any particular theme.

### Summary

Overall, Cohort 4 members expressed that Convening 1 helped them ground in the values of MEV and created a nurturing environment. Most said, however, that their MEV journey was just beginning and that they still have a lot to learn. A common theme emerged around the need for MEV to provide additional support to address the trauma surfaced in the convening space, particularly given that this cohort is all women of color. Several cohort members also wanted MEV to support conversations related to gender non-conforming bias and take extra steps to ensure that trans women in the cohort not be tokenized or put in the position of educating or supporting other cohort members around gender issues.

### Orientation to MEV Vision and Concepts

One goal of the first convening is to help set the foundation for the MEV experience. The following are key takeaways from the interviews on this topic:

- **Laying the groundwork for beloved community.** Cohort members varied to what extent they felt like beloved community was developed in Convening 1. However, all but one
thought that, at the very least, the groundwork for beloved community had been laid. As many of the movement makers noted, allowed them to have difficult conversations.

“It allows space for us to build the level of trust necessary to move forward. I don’t think it’s all going to be pretty, rosy, but I think it really was laying the groundwork for us to work together in the future.”

“When the incident happened that was transphobic...the way the debrief was held, I think, was indicative of the kind of beloved community that we can offer and have... I think the seedlings for beloved community to really blossom are there.”

“That's progress to me that there were conversations that were tricky that we were able to move through, but I do think that we didn't engage the guidelines as a group because they were given to us, and we need to do that I think in order to have a foundation for principles of how we’re going to be together, and how we’re going to build the community together. So I’m hopeful for that for next time.”

“I think it was headed in that direction and it got a little derailed. And, I think at the point that people started to be a little more honest about their feelings about one particular challenge, that the beloved community was definitely dismantled. I don't feel like I'm stepping back into Convening 2 into that dynamic. I feel like it might have to be reassembled.”

• **Balance between “head and heart.”** Cohort members generally appreciated the emotional grounding of the convening, though a few (3) said they longed for a more solid conceptual grounding as well.

“I don’t think that it’s a bad thing to ask us to be open hearted and to have us hold space for emotion. That's not a bad thing. I just think we were out of balance... I think it's too heart heavy, and the head was just not in it.”

“I did enjoy most of the aspects of the work that were concrete and talked about the program, and gave less space to really think through how those elements were reflected in our work... It has felt like there was a lot of personal time and relationship building built into the agenda, but that might just be part of the design.”

“I felt like it landed in the personal very quickly, without an understanding of the professional experiences... I didn't know if I could look to MEV as professional development, and building, and strengthening... [Later] I thought, wow, there are women in this room I could be working with in the next six months if I rest my glance right and play my cards right. But, it wasn’t facilitated by the experience.”
Overall Impressions of Convening 1

The information gathered through the interviews generally reinforced what was shared through the convening evaluation forms. Before moving into the more detailed feedback, it is important to acknowledge the transphobic experience inadvertently facilitated by one of the guest speakers, and the way in which faculty responded. This was viewed as both a positive and a negative by most respondents, in that while they felt that the faculty should have spoken up in the moment, they also appreciated the way in which they took responsibility for this and used it as a learning opportunity. The following quotes are illustrative of how cohort members perceived both the incident and the way in which faculty responded:

“Folks who were invited from the outside to come in and speak to us, these indigenous leaders, in their conversation, in their chat, in the circle, they kind of just carried on this conversation in a transphobic way, and no one interrupted it and no one put a stop to it, neither the facilitators nor the participants or anyone in the circle, and so Monica got up and left, and after a certain amount of taking it, I just got up and left, and then I stayed kind of frozen in some ways... I was frozen and thinking of, ‘Oh my God, is this really happening?’”

“There was a conversation that happened the day after to address all that happened, but the concern is it became more about the lack of response from folks, and the awareness to really understand how to, in that moment, interrupt a violent situation against a participant, against the people who felt harmed... It was alarming for me to realize that in this moment, in this week, my fear had in some ways manifested itself in this moment, and I felt in some ways really questioning whether I belonged in [MEV] or not, and thinking of the future gatherings and it was definitely a learning moment, so I can appreciate the way folks reflected and were apologetic and were like, ‘We want to do better,’ and also it just sucks that it has to be on the backs of folks that experience this harm regularly.”

“It turned out to be a good thing because we were able to voice our concerns and [faculty] were listening and, of course, apologetic but also wanting to know how they can do things different. Our feedback was to let folks who are presenting to us know who’s in the room so they know not to insult anybody. It wasn’t deliberate. It just was what it was. We all looked like females. There really wasn’t an identifying factor that the speaker could have seen.”

Highlights for Cohort Members

- Right balance of pacing and spaciousness. Almost all cohort members (19) indicated that the they were provided with the space to practice self-care at the convening, and were able to take the personal time and space they needed to be fully present.
“[The convening] was paced in a way that definitely promoted self-care. We had lots of down time in between sessions. There was time for a debrief, which also could be considered self-care. Taking a break from the heavy nitty gritty stuff. There was community dinner and community gather at night. It definitely promoted self-care... I feel like it was done pretty great.”

“I really appreciated the pace of the convening, in that the facilitators and trainers were flexible, moving at our pace. I’m not accustomed to that... The trainers check in and get a pulse check of the group. And to be flexible to change in agenda, or to address an issue that's not on the agenda but has come up, I appreciate that. And I hope that I can bring that to my work.”

“On the second day I really listened to myself. I was like, ‘Instead of struggling in space and trying to just ignore what I’m going through, I’m just not going to participate today’... When I decided to do that, people were really supportive. I was really thankful for that... I’m glad that the response was what it was, which is to take care of yourself so that you can come back as a full person. I think that’s wonderful.”

- **Feeling cared for.** In addition to the pacing and spaciousness of the convening, about a quarter of cohort members (5) emphasized that they felt very cared for and nurtured in the space.

  “I don’t think I’ve ever felt so taken care of in a lot of ways, just in the sense that there was this spaciousness around the programming and the food. You would think these would be little things, but they’re not. Because oftentimes when you’re working in business spaces, everyone’s broke. [It was great] to be in a place where it’s like, ‘Hey y’all, we have these spirulina smoothies and we want you to go and have time and be with each other.’”

- **Safe space in an environment with all women of color.** About one-third of individuals (7) mentioned the comfortableness of the space that was created by being in a room of all women of color. Some mentioned that it felt like a “sisterhood” or a “family” right from the beginning.

  “After doing introductions and getting to know our other cohort members, I think MEV did a really good job at reinforcing or telling us that we belonged there. At that moment in time, we are all where we need to be or should be and we are all bringing unique perspectives and strong perspectives and strong experiences to this work. So they reinforced why we were selected and I thought that was amazing and the way they did it was really beautiful.”

- **Humility and flexibility of staff and faculty.** About one-third of cohort members (7) noted that they appreciated that faculty seemed to be on a journey with the cohort, and that they acknowledged when things did not go as they expected. For example, some
cohort members specifically mentioned the openness of the staff in a discussion that unfolded Friday morning about one of the Thursday night presenters.

“The faculty was on it and acknowledged it and said, ‘Yes, this is the way in which we could have done better.’ I’m not in a place to speak about whether or not that mitigated the harm because I’m not part of the trans and gender nonconforming community. But to me I felt that was a really necessary practice in terms of being like, ‘Yes, we are fallible. We are human, and we're not going to pretend like we always have the right answers.’”

“The team was very understanding and there was a moment where we needed to voice a concern. What I got back from the team, what I felt from the team is that they didn't feel like they knew everything. They didn't feel like that our questions weren't valid or that our concerns weren't valid. It seemed like they were having a learning experience as well. That made the situation more relaxing, made it more healing.

- Opportunities to learn and process through art and spirituality. About half of cohort members (10) expressed their appreciation for the incorporation of art and spirituality in the convening.

“"I felt like one thing that was strong in the convening was singing and art and music and all of that as a part of, an important part of our being together, and it was really impactful.”

“It's been part of my own vision for so long with the work that I do that it was also refreshing to be able to not have to apologize for wanting to have faith or spirituality incorporated into the work.”

- Incorporation of physical practice. Most individuals (16) appreciated the incorporation of Forward Stance and physical practice into their time together. About a quarter of cohort members (5) expressed that they would have liked to have gone deeper with Forward Stance.

“It gave me something to come home with and to practice... To me it's a power builder. It's an inner power builder. So to really know where you are in your center, in your work, in your conversations, in your travels, just being able to hold yourself in a space where you're not physically slugged down.“

“I feel like there wasn't enough time, especially if we're going to have Forward Stance as an integral technology that we're using. I think there could've been more time, more introduction.”

Lowlights for Cohort Members

- Lack of support to address issues of trauma. About one-third of individuals (7) specifically brought up the level of trauma that was surfaced during the convening and wondered how to best hold and process it.
“It was a good example of how we’re trying to do this deep work, and then what are the protocols? Who’s there to really catch our people that are most vulnerable? A lot of people talk about not being able to sleep at night, and just having nightmares and being restless, a lot of crying... We were left vulnerable in a way with a lot of heavy emotions, some positive and some not so positive. How were they really creating a space to support that?... There were probably several occasions, where the experience may have created an experience where it was the opposite of what the intentions were.

“I don't know how [MEV] really talks about self-care in trying to address trauma and vicarious trauma in this work. As women of color who are directly impacted, what does it mean for us to be these powerhouse leaders that are dealing with violent situations on a daily basis, both personally and also in the way that we’re engaging this work? How do we talk about that? How do we talk about those dynamics and how that manifests in our life, and what do we do with that trauma? How do we release that trauma?”

“I assumed that if we were going to be going deep into personal experiences and history that there were going to be some mechanisms in place to support the women in the room... Topics came up, and agitations and triggers arose, and there wasn’t a trauma-informed response in place... I thought from a programmatic standpoint it might have been helpful to have had some additional supports in place.

“Really needing to hold space in a different way because I don’t believe there’s going to be one convening that happens in which there’s not going to be some very serious and significant trauma to probably multiple of our cohort members either that happens in this space or that happens at home when they’re gone and how we can hold that together.”

- Not enough intentionality in supporting trans women and addressing cis privilege. Almost half of the cohort (9) worried about either tokenizing transgender women or putting them in a position to have to carry the emotional weight of the group. During the interviews, many reflected on what it really means to include and support their trans sisters.

“At moments, there was a lack of understanding around cis privilege...[and] privilege around being gender conforming. That was kind of really painful to witness... I do have a concern about the potential harmfulness of this space to trans and gender nonconforming folks. Because, folks don't know what they're saying and that is really, really concerning to me as we get deeper and deeper into the work.

“Since MEV has never had trans women...it’s a real thing that was fraught with a lot of missteps for them in our cohort convening, and I am not excluded from that. I made my own missteps in there, being not as aware as I should be, and so I have concerns about the pressure that puts on my trans sisters having
to represent not only margin communities, but margins of the margins communities and how to hold that space.

“[Trans women of color are] included in the spaces, we're included in the causes and the movements in ways that is very mediocre, entry level. But when it comes down to the real core elements of being there for trans identified women and men of color...people are just not getting it... We're only included if we're just there... It just feels like as a trans black woman, I was brought into the cohort more like a token because advancing ‘me’ is just not part of the goals... We just haven't got there yet.

“The outpouring of emotion then became emotional baggage that these two women had to carry. That really frustrated me, and it angered me because it is similar to the ways in which supremacy and patriarchy falls on women.

- **Pressure to emote without being ready.** This was communicated by those that wanted a different balance between “head and heart,” but several cohort members (4) also connected to the feeling that opening up deep wells of emotion without a clear trauma-informed support structure was problematic.

  “I do wonder if maybe there might have been a pressure to emote, or to feel. I will say when we went to the women's center, at one point she was like, ‘Please come into a circle and just bring your grief into the room.’ It bounds people a little bit, but it's also a really intense ask, to ask people to bring folks' grief into the room.

  “I want reflection, but I don't want it to be where we all have to go around every single time and share all of our feelings. I don't want to have to be forced to do that, I want to do it when it comes naturally and I feel it. But I don't want us to all have to share it every single time because sometimes I'm reflecting and processing, and that's the way I think through and grow from the work.”

- **Imbalance between whole group and small group work.** Two cohort members made comments specifically about group size. One comment was about breaking off into smaller groups to get to know cohort members better. The other, was about not breaking off into smaller groups, when having critical conversations such as the one around transphobia.

  “I was hoping for some more ‘getting acquainted’ kinds of exercises or opportunities, more facilitated ‘getting acquainted’ opportunities in smaller groups or pairs, or that kind of thing. We spent a lot of time in a large group, and there were so many of us that that was really challenging for me.

  “I feel like it should have continued to stay in the circle. The process of the briefing behind it, talking it all the way through, that should have remained one whole circle, not several sub groups. Because that right there creates a whole different dynamic...it's no longer centered and got people all centered in ways that everybody feels connected and feels equal. Because that's the
beauty of a circle, the circle allows you to feel that oneness, that connection. When you break off into sub groups, you no longer have that circle, you have many circles. One circle is wondering what they're saying in their circle, and vice versa.”

- **Mixed feelings about the rooming situation.** More than a quarter of the women (5) mentioned the rooming situation in their interviews. There were different opinions, with some expressing their appreciation for having roommates, and others emphasizing the importance of having private space. Of the women who felt strongly about the need for their own space, some felt that it exacerbated movement habits around the culture of scarcity, particularly for women of color leaders in the movement.

  “Everyone needs to have their own space because it was so intense and people needed to be able to go back to their own space to process that... I think that's such a definite, particularly having a cohort of all people of color and they haven't experienced that and knowing that this is a must for our cohort.

  “It's little things like that I feel like this project may not have structurally considered that may have been something that they asked other people to do and in this case I feel like there's a hardship. It actually proved to be a hardship for a couple of women of color who walked in not feeling embraced because of that... It was all these small things that I just don't think that MEV literally got a chance to consider that I hope that they are considering now.

  “One thing I really, really liked was the ‘roommat ing.’ Because it gave you time to get to know one individual person a little more intimately. We did that in the circles and we did that during our breaks, but you got to know your roommate a little more intimately because you shared that room with them, you slept in there, you woke up with them... We had time to talk about work, we had time to talk about family, what brought us to the movement and things like that, so you got a little close with your roommate and then to be able to be in circles and then split up and your roommate be in a different circles, and then come back in the evening when we're in our downtime to talk about what group we were in and what we worked around and how we felt the group went. And so that to me was really a lot more empowering and moving.”

  “I see the value in both... Where I work, we only do shared rooms. Most of it is because of funding. But to justify it beyond funding leads to justification that it's team building, and it's an opportunity to get to know folks better. And I hear that, I understand it. But I feel like as the older we get, the more necessary personal time becomes. Also, personal time gets scarcer the older one gets. If you have children, families to provide for, we don't get as much down time or personal time. And it's nice to be able to have that valued, especially for organizers who are so overworked, underpaid.”
Cohort Questions for Faculty

As part of the evaluation, SPR asked all cohort members whether they had questions of faculty. Below are some of the questions they posed:

- What do we need to really build beloved community? When the cohort hits conflict, what do we actually do? How do we handle it in a way that incorporates forwards stance?
- How do younger adults feature in this cohort?
- What are MEV’s desired outcomes? Why does MEV exist?
- When will we start on projects?
- What is the timeline of the experience? What are some of the guideposts?
- How have past cohort members created space to make the most of this experience and apply it to their work?
- What are the conversations around leadership transformation that the faculty are having?
- Is MEV’s goal to develop the cohort’s leadership or the leadership in the communities in which MEV leaders work? Or both? How should the cohort think about this?
- What type of time commitments are expected of cohort members?
- How is MEV going to go about the process of finding healers and spiritual leaders to support Convening 2?

Cohort Recommendations

We also asked cohort members for their recommendations for how the convening experience could be enhanced in the future. Below are the key themes that emerged from their recommendations, which resonate strongly with the feedback provided through the convening evaluations:

- Consider formal training in trauma-informed responses, and/or including staff with formal training in counseling. The seven women that were concerned about the lack of support for trauma surfaced during the convening suggested the faculty become trained in trauma-informed responses or include faculty whose sole purpose was to support and hold the emotional responses in the room. Others (2) also emphasized providing warnings if activities may trigger deep emotion.

  “I think even just having that space and time to recognize that so even if we have to move forward to get content covered and all of that, and we all understand that... I think, is really, really important to say, ‘We’re not just...”
moving on. We understand your pain does not just move on, and so we're going to take a space and a moment to acknowledge that something really bad happened and that you're still in pain from it and to let us hold you in whatever way that we need.”

“I kept thinking about the healing and how when someone is having these kinds of emotional experiences...who can be in the room [and] that's their job, to support that person or those persons? If it means calling them out to a separate space to begin to do that healing work with them, I think would be important. Though we've got the faculty, I think the faculty's purpose is definitely dual but I'm not sure if it's that and if they're trained to do so. So I think it would be really important to have healers in the room who can support folks who may be experiencing that.”

“[Faculty] gave us tips on how to care for ourselves or they gave us tips on physical challenges you might face...but I don't think that they really prepared us for the level of emotional presence that was going to be required and the way that that might impact those of us with various mental health, emotional health, spiritual health needs.

- Identify and make it clear that there are multiple ways to engage. Several women (4) mentioned that it would have been helpful for the facilitators to explicitly address that there are multiple ways to engage. We heard this in the interviews around differences in the degree to which individuals are comfortable being extraverted (2) and expressing emotions (2).

  “I know there was encouragement to build with communities and outside that space, and I don't know that that necessarily needs to be encouraged. I think people are going to do that when they want to, but it also puts this burden of responsibility on the more introverted, like me, that might need to take personal space... I think there's a little bit too much encouragement to always build with each other that puts kind of unnecessary burden on people that might not feel comfortable by pushing back against that.”

  “If there's this pressure to feel as opposed to maybe just acknowledging or saying, 'Some of you might have really intense emotions, some of you might not. Whatever you're doing, know that that's good, and that's okay.' That feels more, from what I've gathered about MEV, that feels more like the ethos.”

- Recognize that having a cohort of all women of color does not mean that all cohort members share a common analysis around race, gender, and class. Two cohort members talked specifically about how some work may need to be done in order to establish a common critical analysis among all cohort members.

  “I think it's wrong to assume that we all have shared analysis around race, class, and gender... To continue to have conversations around that, I'm not sure if everybody's on the same page with that. You can't assume that just
because they come from great organizations or we can't assume that just because things look good on paper that if it means that people actually get it.”

- **Make sure that there are diverse speakers and facilitators, including those that are gender non-conforming.** Two cohort members requested that staff consider adding someone who is gender nonconforming to the faculty team or to the list of speakers and trainers who engage with the team.

  “I don't know if it's a concern or a worry, but maybe just a reflection of I hope that moving forward that we get better at including through language, activities, and even our speakers, that they're more diverse in the different spectrums of gender. I was surprised that that wasn't more intentional.”

- **Consider regional and geographic differences, especially in planning convenings.** Two cohort members indicated that it would be nice to have a convening in the South. For one respondent, this is because of its rich African American and Black history, while another felt it was important given the unique political climate in the South.

  “A lot of the convenings are happening outside of the deep South. So actually the site visit in New Mexico on the pueblos reminded me that we also, as Black folks in the room, in my opinion, need to be able to hold a convening in the deep South because so much of the migrations happened and started from the deep South... We're having a convening in North Carolina, that's one part but that's not the deep South. So I think we need to be able, as Black folks, have that kind of experience but in the deep South. While we were on the pueblos, I think it spoke to the Native people that were there and also the Latinas that were in the room too. And for Black folks, it definitely made us crave our ancestral land.”

  “Movement work in the United States generally is very fractured. Again, being someone from the South, I think that there is some great blue state representation, and then, the rest of the country is forgotten about. I think that that's a losing strategy of social justice and racial justice and gender justice folks and that it's just a losing strategy to not invest in work and some of the places that are seen as hard and difficult. Or to expect the work to look exactly the same in places that are different.”