Cohort 4 Interview Themes and Highlights

SPR completed 18 interviews with members of Cohort 4 between April 15 and May 29, 2019. The interviews gathered cohort members’ insights on their MEV experiences to date, including a detailed set of questions on the Intercambio, cohort relationships, outcomes to date, and topics for further exploration. This memo summarizes key themes that arose from those interviews.

Unique Characteristics of Cohort 4

Several factors distinguish Cohort 4 from previous cohorts, including that this cohort is made up of all women of color, that it is the first cohort to include transgender women, that a high percentage of cohort members have been in transition (personally and/or professionally), and that the broader political climate has been a constant and punishing assault on the cohort members as individuals and as professionals.

More specifically, many Movement Makers (MMs) have gone through a professional transition over the course of their cohort experience. While this transition was welcomed by some as a way to focus their work with specific populations, others have been pushed out of their positions in ways that were painful and traumatic. On a personal level, several cohort members have grappled with illness or physical ailments and/or the death of loved ones and friends. Most of the cohort members we interviewed mentioned the level of trauma that has been experienced in the lives of MMs that is being brought into the cohort space and how that has influenced group dynamics: some pointed specifically to the ways in which white supremacy and internalized racial oppression have played out for this cohort of people of color in the absence of whiteness.

In the context of these challenges, cohort members and their organizations have continued forward; several MMs reported exciting new partnerships and funding to support their work, and other MM organizations have grown so much that they have expanded to new locations.

It is important to ground the experiences of Cohort 4 within this broader context and political moment, and attend to how the many facets of individuals’ identities play a mediating role in their experiences of MEV. The acknowledgement of both identity and the broader context and their effects on the cohort’s experience is an important part of their unique stories.

Overarching Themes

- **Many MMs expressed a deep sadness that their MEV experience is coming to an end.** These MMs felt that their work with MEV was just getting started and wished that the experience could be extended in some way.

- **There were mixed feelings about whether beloved community has been built within this cohort.** Some MMs said that beloved community has “absolutely” been built within the cohort, while others felt that the cohort has made progress towards the creation of beloved community. Many spoke of the deep “sisterhood” or sense of “family” that they formed with other members of the cohort, sharing that they felt that they made lasting relationships. A few MMs, however, indicated that they feel separated or disconnected.
from the group to the extent that they experience anxiety around attending convenings. These women expressed feelings of being an outsider for a variety of reasons, describing their impression that tensions within the group have inhibited beloved community from being built.

- **Most MMs viewed this cohort as unique in its level of trauma and the degree to which trauma is showing up within the convening space.** Trauma was a key theme emerging from our baseline interviews, and it continued to be a theme during this midpoint round.

- **A few individuals perceived that the dynamics of the cohort reflect the way in which white supremacy plays out in the absence of whiteness.** This was described by MMs of all different racial/ethnic identities as impacting the way in which cohort members relate to each other, the more visible manifestation of internalized racial oppression, and the ways in which faculty hold and carry out the convening agendas (e.g. perfectionism, need for control, etc.).

### Reflections on the Intercambio

Sixteen out of the 18 MMs we interviewed participated in the Intercambio. All responses within this section refer to the reflections of those 16 individuals.

- **Many who attended the Intercambio described it as a deeply moving and transformational experience.** These MMs described the experience as “fantastic,” “powerful,” and “amazing.” Several individuals also said that they felt it was exceptionally well-organized by faculty and staff.

- **Many MMs highlighted language justice as a powerful part of the convening.** Several noted that this was the first time they had experienced language justice and mentioned that it was implemented “beautifully.” From this experience, a few participants formed new insights about the parallels between the loss of Mayan language and the loss of Indigenous languages in the US. Others spoke of how the experience deepened their understanding of English as a privileged and dominant language, used to exclude and marginalize non-English speakers.

- **The most common takeaway from the Intercambio, which was communicated by almost all of the MMs we interviewed on this topic, was a realization of how insulated the US movement is from transnational movements to end violence.** Many also communicated a desire for a deeper conversation about immigration and migration, particularly within the current political moment. Other themes included building solidarity and “showing up for each other,” land rights as a universal human rights issue, and similarities between the Indigenous experience across the Americas.

- **Many MMs expressed feeling deeply inspired by the Mesoamerican participants, with several hoping that they could stay connected.** MMs described learning so much from their Mesoamerican sisters, particularly around the political violence they experience and the importance of intergenerational work. Furthermore, MMs who participated in optional activities with the Mesoamerican women, such as dinners and social activities, reported developing stronger relationships during the Intercambio.
Outcomes to Date

MMs responded to the question of how participating in MEV has impacted themselves and the broader movement from a very personal perspective. It is important to note that even MMs who described feeling disconnected from the larger group still felt that they had grown as a result of their MEV experience.

- **Enhanced confidence in their own leadership.** MMs described finding strength in their leadership, having the confidence to lean more into their roles as leaders, and realizing how much they have to offer and give to their colleagues and to the field.

- **New frameworks for what it means to be a leader.** MMs said that MEV has raised important questions about what leadership is, how they want to do their work, how to show up as a leader, and the realization that they are leaders outside of their organization (i.e., their organizational roles do not define who they are as leaders).

- **Increased understanding of self-care (especially spaciousness and breath) and how important it is for sustaining themselves and their work.** MMs spoke to their enhanced understanding of the importance of balance, building space for themselves, thinking intentionally about self-sustainability, and the role of spirituality in self-care.

- **Impact on the broader movement to end violence.** They spoke specifically of shifts in language, collaboration across movement sectors and cohorts, the influence of MEV MMs from prior cohorts on communities and organizations, and a deeper understanding of how self-care translates into sustainability for the movement as a whole.

- **A shift in how funders are engaging within the movement.** Some MMs have noticed an increased willingness of funders to provide flexible funding and lighten the lift around reporting, which has helped broaden the pool of organizations that receive funding (to include more organizations run by women of color) and reduced their reliance on federal funding. It has allowed these organizations to do more work focused on addressing root causes and provided a space for organizations to experiment with new models and approaches. A few MMs, however, questioned whether philanthropy can ever truly support liberation.

Topics for Further Exploration

The following are topics that MMs would like to explore more deeply as a cohort. These are organized from the most- to least-frequently highlighted topics.

- **Get to know one another’s work better.** Some MMs specifically highlighted “mapping” as a strategy for understanding each other’s work and identifying common issues around which they can mobilize.

- **Dive deeper into the issues of immigration and migration,** particularly given that the Intercambio was held in Guatemala, the continued impact of family detention at the US border, and the current political climate.

- **For the cohort to develop a deeper sense of solidarity as a community that can move through tension, difference, and courageous conversations together.** These MMs
wanted to explore questions such as: What does it look like to show up for each other within and outside the MEV space? How do cisgender women genuinely show up as allies for transgender women? What commitments do MMs have to each other and to the cohort as a whole? These MMs acknowledged that cohort members have had very different life experiences and distinct relationships to violence, and felt that the group’s ability to build together would be limited without a common understanding and respect for these differences.

- **Dive deeper into anti-Blackness and how it manifests within the group.** MMs wanted to explore what it means to be pro-Black, how they can combat anti-Blackness in their workplaces and communities, how to develop a deeper and more shared understanding of anti-Blackness in the US, and to how to lift up the impact of naming anti-Blackness for non-Black women of color. There was a link between this conversation about anti-Blackness and the desire to explore what solidarity looks like among women of color. Similarly, some MMs felt that tensions around anti-Blackness and Indigenous invisibility have yet to be fully addressed.

- **Explore what collective action could look like among the members of this cohort.** There was a clear desire to think more holistically about how each of them is a piece in the puzzle of the larger ecosystem and to find opportunities for “cross-pollination” and joint creativity. A few MMs also noted a desire to explore more regional organizing, as well as forming caucusing groups around particular issue areas.

- **Support around giving and receiving feedback, particularly in their relationship with MEV faculty.** These MMs wondered how to bridge any tensions as a community by using specific strategies for providing supportive feedback to faculty.

- **Economic violence, particularly in its relation to the Intercambio.** The Intercambio experience surfaced feelings and insights into the role of capitalism in waging violence against women and communities. Some MMs wanted to explore how or if nonprofits and foundations can work toward liberation if they are also invested in and a product of capitalism. Finally, there were questions around the role of fundraising in perpetuating economic violence, particularly in how systems of power and privilege prevent women of color-led organizations from reaching their fundraising goals.