

YOUNG BLACK CREATIVES IN ST. LOUIS:

**A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THEIR ASPIRATIONS, NETWORKS,
AND ENGAGEMENT WITH THE REGIONAL ARTS ECOSYSTEM**

DR. JONG BUM KWON



**REGIONAL ARTS
COMMISSION
OF ST. LOUIS**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	1
INTRODUCTION	6
KEY THEMES.....	21
IMPLICATIONS AND TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS.....	36
APPENDIX.....	40
REFERENCES.....	41

In the Fall of 2023, the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis learned more about our artists in the release of Creatives Count. It was an important next step after conducting a similar survey roughly 10 years earlier. In both surveys we found out about how artists experienced St. Louis. One key distinction was the recognition that we do not know as much about Black artists. Creatives Count encouraged further research on that topic to address what we do not know. Dr. Jong Bum Kwon's work using qualitative research methods is a response to that call.

Over the summer of 2024, Dr. Kwon, with support from Gregory Maurice and I, interviewed 100 Black creatives to learn about their experiences in St. Louis. Many of the conversations were nearly 2 hours in length. He visited where they presented their work and attended events. Additionally, Dr. Kwon and I would have long conversations about what it means to be a Black creative in St. Louis. This robust dialogue challenged both of our thoughts on the role of funding and the values that undergird the practices of Black artists.

For me, as a poet and sociologist, I found Dr. Kwon's contribution to our understanding of the Black artists and creatives in St. Louis compelling. While in some ways it is useful to treat the terms artist and creative as synonymous, they are different for me. Creative is someone whose work is broader than artists with the goal of earning income from their practice. In that way, St. Louis has long had Black creatives dating back to Elizabeth Keckley during the antebellum period. Black artists who sang, danced, painted and performed music were mentioned in news articles in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century. Yet with these deep roots in the culture of St. Louis, Dr. Kwon's research reveals that there has been little harvest for Black artists and creatives with limited institutional support to foster growth.

– Mk Sadiq, Research and Evaluation Lead,
Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis

My deepest thanks go to the Black creatives who shared their time, insight, and personal stories with me. This project could only exist because of their generosity, their spirit, and their faith in me. I owe them more than I can express, and I hope I've honored their trust in some small measure.

– Dr. Jong Bum Kwon, Cultural Anthropology

SUGGESTED CITATION

Kwon, Jong Bum. *Young Black Creatives in St. Louis: A Qualitative Study of Their Aspirations, Networks, and Engagement with the Regional Arts Ecosystem*. Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis, 2025.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Young Black Creatives* study, conducted in partnership with the Regional Arts Commission (RAC) of St. Louis, provides an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the lived experiences of 100 young Black creatives in the region. Designed as a complement to RAC's *Creatives Count* survey, this project addresses critical gaps in understanding by emphasizing personal narratives and analytical depth over generalizability.

The responses, therefore, should not be taken as representative of the young Black creative population. The goal is to better understand Black creatives' perspectives and subjectivities, and to provide guidance for policymaking and practices to better engage with them.

Conducted between June and December 2024, the study utilized life and work history interviews to investigate three major themes identified in the *Count*: entrepreneurship, grants, and creative networks.

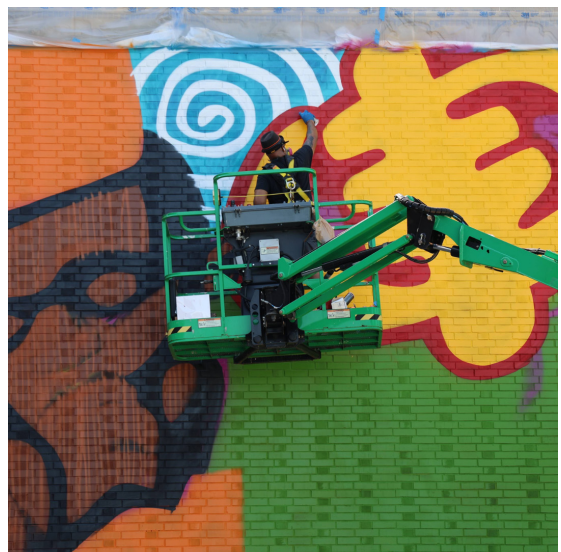
We identified participants through purposive or "theoretical sampling" (see body for more in-depth methodological discussion). The findings are rooted in the complex socio-economic, racial, and cultural realities shaping Black creatives' efforts to build sustainable careers in the arts in St. Louis.



St. Louis Shakespeare Festival



Pack Dance



St. Louis Mural Project

KEY FINDINGS

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS IDENTITY AND STRATEGY FOR WELLBEING

Eighty percent of participants identified as entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship was viewed not only as a necessary adaptation to economic precarity but also as a mode of self-expression, autonomy, and intriguingly, racial well-being. For many, being an entrepreneur meant being their own brand and business in response to systemic exclusion from formal institutions and mainstream opportunities, or in their words, “freedom.” This idea of freedom is not unique, but when voiced by young Black creatives, it has more complex connotations.

SEGREGATED AND RESOURCE-LIMITED NETWORKS

While networks were widely acknowledged as vital to success, participants described a deeply segregated creative ecosystem. Most Black creatives participated in mostly racially homogeneous networks with limited, if any, engagement with large established or legacy arts institutions. These networks often operated in isolation from the predominantly White arts infrastructure of the region.

LIMITED ACCESS AND AWARENESS OF GRANTS AND INSTITUTIONS

Only 21% of respondents had applied for grants, and most lacked knowledge about funding opportunities and regional arts institutions (a rate lower than reported in the *Count*). Racially bounded networks and limited outreach from grant-makers were key barriers.

Trusted intermediaries—individuals within Black creative communities who act as social connectors—emerged as crucial conduits of opportunity and information. Their role, however, does not necessarily indicate connection with institutions or agents with significant resources.

LIMITED SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Many creatives indicated they were raised and educated in predominantly Black spaces. Nonetheless, given the social-spatial realities of the region, they had to navigate White spaces for education, jobs, and other opportunities. They described challenges and social, emotional and mental consequences of learning and managing White norms and expectations. Their narratives suggested racially limited networks (social capital) and discomfort and lack of confidence in White institutions (cultural capital). Creatives expressed mistrust of White mainstream institutions resulting from their experiences navigating those spaces. Relatedly, some revealed anxiety and self-doubt in their ability to write grants and meet expectations.

DEMOGRAPHIC AND CONTEXTUAL INSIGHTS

- Participants were primarily aged 18–34, with some older creatives included for comparative insights.
- The majority came from lower-middle and working-class backgrounds and were raised in predominantly Black, often less-resourced, neighborhoods and schools, relative to White ones.
- Despite socio-economic challenges, nearly all participants had attended some college, and many held

undergraduate or graduate degrees. A very few received arts-related degrees. Creatives' (and their parents' or guardians') aspirations for social mobility through education was clear.

- Most identified as self-taught artists, frequently relying on informal learning sources like YouTube and peer mentoring, and launched careers through sharing and selling work through social media platforms. They usually relied on peers for learning, encouragement, and feedback, and some created "collectives," informal formal groupings, to advance their aspirations.
- A small number had some training through church choirs, school music and arts programs, non-profit organizations (such as St. Louis Artworks), and private lessons (especially for those in dance).
- Young Black creatives were drawn to creative work, despite all its challenges, in part due to desire for authenticity, expressive autonomy, community, and personal well-being.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This exploratory phase reveals the resilience, innovation, and aspirations of young Black creatives amidst persistent structural barriers. Their narratives underscore the need for:

Increased investment in community-based mentorship and professional development.

- Additional research is necessary to identify and examine the numerous BIPOC-centered organizations that have provided mentorship and development.
- It is vital to recognize Black arts organizations are severely underfunded.

According to RAC's recent strategic planning report (2020), "Almost half the citizens of St. Louis are African American, and there are no organizations of color with budgets exceeding \$1 million."

Investment in incubating Black creatives as businesses.

- Black creatives overwhelmingly identify as entrepreneurs and see themselves as businesses, influencing their approach to creative practice, due in part to experiences of social-structural marginalization.
- They need financial support and entrepreneurial knowledge and skills.

Identify and support Black-led creative networks.

- There are creatives who have taken upon themselves to act as social hubs (central network nodes), intentionally reaching out to creatives and providing information as well as opportunities. They often do so with their own resources despite financial challenges. It is important to identify them, their needs, and their motivations.
- These are the creatives who also connect creatives to the mainstream arts ecosystem, provide opportunities for professional development, and cultivate collective identity and purpose.

Strategic efforts to redress inequities in the arts ecosystem through cooperation with broader efforts to address racial disparities in the region.

- Investments in predominantly Black schools and neighborhoods, as they are the primary settings for socialization and social development.
- Identification and support for key community institutions and programs

that address clear inequalities in social and cultural capital.

- This includes opportunities to network and engage with people and organizations across racial and class lines and develop communication and “soft skills” that build personal confidence and aptitude in navigating different social-racial institutions. This is not a recommendation for assimilationist policies, but one for strategic self-presentation.
- It is important to review the impact of the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation’s (VICC) voluntary school transfer program on Black creative socialization and development.

Comprehensive “cultural planning” for the region, coordinating across agencies, institutions, and businesses, and with creatives.

- Culture, which includes the arts, is the “glue” that holds a region together, connecting people through creating meaning, identification, and feelings of belonging. It is critical to understand and develop strategies to overcome decades of social, cultural, economic, and spatial divisions.

Sober reflection on grant-making procedures.

- This includes critical reflection and revision of grant-making practices, considering findings related to unequal distribution of social and cultural capital.
- Related to the recommendation on Black entrepreneurship, it is important to reconsider the kinds of projects or supports grants can or should support.
- Educate grant reviewers about racial inequalities, and the roles of the

nonprofit, philanthropic, and the arts sectors in the region.

- Requires more than education on bias. There needs to be a more critical approach about the social-cultural consequences of structural-institutional inequality.

Rebrand and recuperate reputations of arts organizations in the mainstream arts ecosystem to motivate Black and non-White creatives’ engagement.

- It is important to better understand how and why certain institutions are understood as being “White.”
- Invest in community engagement teams and develop long-term community engagement strategies. The research revealed “showing up” is vital to developing trust and partnership.

Build and promote comprehensive and collaborative marketing strategies to capture the attention of the region’s diverse populations.

- Not only is the region spatially segregated, but it is also segregated in terms of social networks, virtual and in-person. Evidence suggests most creatives rely on social networks and media to build audience and customer base. However, those too are segregated and fragmented.
- It is important, therefore, to research and create an inventory of media platforms and infrastructure to examine their reach, and to develop more effective communications strategies.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

- Time and resources limited the sample size and the diversity of creative practices in the sample. As mentioned in the body, we also solicited an older cohort to get a better sense of regional

arts history and potential career trajectories. With additional time and resources, the sample size of each age cohort could be expanded for increased reliability.

- While the focus on Black creatives is the study's goal, it is important to reproduce this study with White and non-Black creatives in the region for a more accurate analysis of the role of race and ethnicity in creatives' practices and career trajectories.
- Not enough attention was placed on queer-identified creatives and their experiences. This initial project suggested a significant number of queer creatives and queer-centered networks, and it hinted at their specific challenges and experiences.
- The project did not have the time or resources to conduct a comprehensive network research and analysis. We do not know which and how creatives, organizations, businesses, and governmental agencies are connected. It is important, therefore, to research and create an inventory of media platforms and infrastructure to examine their reach, and to develop more effective communications strategies.
 - In fact, it is important to conduct an inventory of the arts ecosystem/infrastructure. What are the component parts of the ecosystem, and how do they function (or do not function) as part of an ecosystem?
 - This kind of research is vital to understand the circulation of resources, including information and opportunities, as well as obstacles to their movement, and to identify sources of inequity.

- While we now have a better understanding of the experiences and subjectivities of Black creatives, we do not fully understand the cultures and practices of agencies, organizations, and businesses in the arts ecosystem. We strongly urge a detailed inventory and ethnographic study (long-term observation and participation) of the arts ecosystem.

Racial inequity in the arts ecosystem is deeply connected to segregation and the racial inequity in the region. The challenges many young Black creatives experience are related to the racially divided and inequitable state of the region. We cannot assume the "arts" alone can redress inequality. Accordingly, development of the arts sector and arts ecosystem must work along with broader economic and urban policymaking, and vice versa. They share a mutual future. The insights gained provide a foundational understanding for further research (asking better questions) and for shaping equitable cultural policy, youth programming, and urban economic development in St. Louis.



Stray Dog Theatre

INTRODUCTION

The present study, *Young Black Creatives*, was undertaken in partnership with Mk Sadiq, Research and Evaluation Manager at the Regional Arts Commission, to address the significant gaps and questions arising from the *Creatives Count*, a broad commissioned survey of creative/artistic practitioners in the region (2023; hereafter *Count* unless specified).

In contradistinction to the *Count*, this research is primarily qualitative and emphasizes analytic depth over generalizability. It is based on one hundred in-depth life and work history interviews with Black creatives conducted from June to December 2024. The report's aim is to help inform and refine the next *Creatives Count*, which should incorporate a robust qualitative component.

It is important to note that I conducted this research as an exploratory phase of a more comprehensive project, because so little was known about young Black creatives and their creative worlds.¹

Consequently, the study may be corrected or modified with additional interviews, field research, and further deep coding and analysis. However, much was gleaned from this study, providing a more solid foundation for the next phase.

This report provides a preliminary analysis focused on, but not limited to, three areas: entrepreneurship, grants, and creative



Opera Theatre of Saint Louis

networks. These are the themes spotlighted and identified as warranting further investigation in the *Count*. Furthermore, it begins to flesh out young Black creatives' complex and complicated lives – their aspirations, challenges, and achievements. By doing so, this assessment also addresses a general lack of nuanced understanding in scholarly and policy literature about who they are, how they see the world, and how they navigate institutions as they strive to create meaningful livelihoods under challenging conditions.² I'm interested in their experiences and interpretations conveyed in their words.

¹ While it is unconventional to use the first person in a policy report such as this, I decided to do so because I want to emphasize that this research was done and written from a specific standpoint (see Appendix) and does not feign a “god’s eye” perspective. This decision aligns with the ethos and style of cultural anthropology as well as feminist and critical race studies.

² Social scientific research on Black youth has been biased towards the lives of the so-called “at risk” and have foregrounded behaviors such as “drugs, gangs, violence, and early parenthood,” which often reinforce racialized stigmas (Ray 2017, 6). Such research ignores the majority of young Black people “who continuously seek to become upwardly mobile” (6) and embrace purportedly mainstream values and ideas (see also Kelley 1997; Newman 2009; Rodriguez-Muniz 2015).

BACKGROUND

In 2023, the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis (RAC) published findings from the *Count*, nearly a decade after *Artists Count* (2012), its first major survey. *Artists Count* was commissioned to inform RAC's strategic planning for the decade, and it sought to understand how artists, defined as "anyone who considers himself or herself an artist," perceived the region's arts ecosystem and their "motivations, opportunities and challenges" (Carnwath 2023, 1).

The *Count* aimed to build upon this first study and reassess the regional arts ecosystem, considering the serious disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and so-called national reckoning with anti-Black racism and violence inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement and "Ferguson Uprising" (2014-2015).

The *Count* made three important changes. The first, evident in the title, was the use of the more expansive category "creative".

We use the term "creatives" to refer collectively to all artists, craftspeople, culture bearers, designers, makers, musicians, performers and other people who are creatively active. We use "creative practice" to describe the activities they do, whether paid or unpaid (Carnwath 2).

The decision was made to engage with individuals who may have been missed in the first study and were disconnected from RAC and the arts ecosystem. In this present study, I continue the use of

"creative" for the same reasons; moreover, I conjecture the term "creative" may have significance regarding self-identity and practice. Related to the first, the second was a concerted effort to address the underrepresentation of "people of color" in past studies. And third was the employment of two focus group discussions, to obtain qualitative data (more in-depth and detailed narratives) to supplement the survey.

Methodologically, the *Count* was designed to be more inclusive. It drew upon the insights and experiences of four non-White "Community Connectors," representing four distinctive creative fields (fashion, music, film, and community-based art). In addition to identifying and selecting focus group participants, they also helped refine survey questions, strategize public outreach and provide feedback on the final research outcomes. As emphasized in the report, the purpose of the focus groups was not generalizability, but rather to provide a window, albeit limited, onto the lives of creatives in the Connectors' networks.

The *Count* highlighted the persistence of racial inequities in the region's arts sector. The survey consistently showed, whether on measures of household income, perceived financial well-being, retirement savings, access to health care, or home ownership, "as a group, White respondents are faring considerably better financially than their BIPOC peers" (4). Those findings should not be taken as a simple reflection or consequence of existing racial inequalities evident in the St. Louis region as well as the nation. According to the report's author, the survey suggested

“there are differences in the ways that BIPOC and White respondents approach and support their creative practices that may have implications for their needs and well-being” and warranted further investigation (6).

The *Count* raised numerous questions about BIPOC creatives approach to their practices and livelihoods. The most intriguing was in the finding Black creatives were found to be more likely to identify as entrepreneurs than their White counterparts. How this may have affected or were affected by their experiences with the arts ecosystem was unclear. Relatedly, how they perceive grants and interact with granting agencies required further consideration.

Furthermore, the survey and focus groups indicated the importance of organically forming networks amongst all creatives for mentorship, information, and social and material resources. The *Count* acknowledged poor understanding of who the network hubs are, how they form networks, and what roles they play. Crucially, given the region’s segregation and entrenched racial inequities, additional inquiry is imperative to apprehend whether these networks are racially bounded and consequently resource distribution segregated.

Mk and I designed *Young Black Creatives* to supplement the findings of *Creatives Count*, emphasizing qualitative data gathering and analysis (in-depth life and work history interviews). In addition to this motivation, the project was inspired by the notion of “art worlds” first proposed by Howard Becker (1982). Art worlds is a concept which conceives art

production of any kind as *collective action*. As one scholar explained, it “seeks to capture interactions within and between the sets of artists, audiences, and ‘support personnel’ (e.g. managers, promoters, producers, engineers, journalists) who collectively make particular forms of art happen and shape those art forms” (Crossley 2015, 8). Art, therefore, is not a product of individual talent or genius but ecosystems. This project aims to illuminate the interaction between young Black creatives and the region’s arts ecosystem. What follows is a summary of findings highlighting young Black creatives. An analysis of the ecosystem itself would require additional research.

As an initial analysis, I do not provide a comprehensive analytic synthesis of my findings; rather, I provide a summary presentation and explanation. While the present examination is only preliminary, it provides greater depth and clarity of understanding, compared to the *Count*, about young Black creatives’ social-economic insecurity, entrepreneurship, social networks, and engagement with the region’s arts ecosystem.³ With additional research, my hope is to contribute to policy discussions around urban community development, poverty alleviation, youth programming and education, and local arts ecosystems, and to promote the creation of more equitable youth and arts infrastructures. It is important to note that I was the data steward, conducted the analysis, and wrote the report. I am responsible for any misinterpretations and limitations.

³ I provide a summary of study limitations and suggestions for further research in the executive summary and at the end of the document.

METHODS

The primary methodological approach is in-depth, life and work history interviews. Survey and focus groups have their strengths as well as weaknesses. While they provide relatively reliable generalizations about a target population, they usually lack depth and understanding of people's experiences and subjectivity – their interpretations and feelings about their social situations and cultural expectations.⁴

In-depth interviews, conducted over multiple hours and sessions, encourage the sharing of private lives and can provide insight into the “inner life” of individuals – their interpretations of social situations and events, accounting of decisions and their consequences, and the cultural scripts that inform worldview and social-cultural expectations (Gerson and Damaske 2020; Pugh 2018).

Furthermore, interviews are adept at making connections between macro-level structures (e.g., labor market), meso-level institutions (e.g., schools and arts organizations), and micro-level processes of meaning-making, decision-making, and developing and maintaining social relationships. In-depth interviews, therefore, bring into focus social patterns, processes and meanings that have been ignored, understudied, or have yet to be identified, facilitating discovery of new empirical and theoretical questions (Gerson and Damaske 9).

I began with the target population of creatives ages 18 to 34. By focusing on the category of “youth”, I aimed to

uncover the career paths of Black creatives, especially their identification as entrepreneurs, and their socialization into the region's arts ecosystem. I was interested in process: understanding how young Black creatives embarking on their creative practices come to understand their career paths, connect with creative networks, and learn to engage (or not engage) with the arts ecosystem.

The sample was not random but constituted through purposive or “theoretical sampling” – strategically identifying participants “well positioned to reveal the practices, mechanisms and relationships” we seek to explain (Gerson and Damaske 2020, 46). With support from Mk Sadiq, I solicited potential participants through “Community Connectors” and the 34 focus group participants from the *Count* and began a process of snowball sampling from their professional and personal networks.

In addition, since Mk Sadiq had longstanding presence in Black creative circles of multiple genres, I drew upon his extensive network. And to obtain a broad range of creative practices and genres, I frequented performances, exhibitions, festivals, arts organizations, and other venues (related to music, dance, design, painting, graphic design, etc.) where creatives showcased and marketed their work. Throughout I was conscientious of obtaining a diverse sample of creative practices, ages, and genders.

⁴ Because surveys rely on researcher's understanding of relevant social categories and presume categorical stability and discreteness, they are less useful in uncovering new or unknown perspectives, therefore limiting theory generation (Luker 2008, 183). Focus groups, moreover, are constrained by the social dynamics and expectations of groups, narrowing the kinds of information that are disclosed.

Every generation, it's said, sees its challenges as unique. This assumption leads to a methodological fallacy. Indeed, as I conducted interviews and began open coding (preliminary and exploratory), I came to the realization of a need for a comparison group, namely those with mature creative careers, to better understand possible trajectories, including leaving creative practice altogether.

Furthermore, drawing deeper historical context through life histories of older Black creatives was necessary to shed light on changes in the region's arts ecosystem. My research found it critical to differentiate experiences by beginning, middle, and mature phases in a creative's career and lifecycle. How creatives understand and experience their creative fields, and the wider arts and culture landscape are related to where they perceive their place in the life course.

Mk and I had quite ambitious research plans. We planned to complete this first interview phase by mid-December 2024 (100 interviews) in around six months.⁵ I began soliciting, vetting, and interviewing creatives in early June 2024.

Nearly all interviews were conducted in person, and on a day, time, and location of the creative's choice, such as coffee shops and public libraries. All physical interview locations were within the St. Louis metropolitan region, and most were in the city proper or in North County (in predominantly Black neighborhoods). The common exception was my office or qualitative research lab at Webster University, located in affluent, largely White, Webster Groves. Six were conducted online, via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, due to either the creatives' tight work schedules or having left the area in

the midst of or after developing their creative practices. All interviews were recorded, after given permission, and supplemented with contemporaneous notes.

In a little over six months, I recorded over two hundred hours of interviews, resulting in over five thousand pages of transcribed text (at 1.5 spacing; or over two million words). I submitted audio recordings to Sonix.ai, an artificial intelligence platform for transcription, which averaged, according to the data service 95-97% precision. I then carefully reviewed each interview for accuracy. I discovered the AI program was not properly calibrated for Black vernacular English, and was not able to capture rhythms, idioms, and regional slang or expressions. Consequently, I edited each interview to capture St. Louis dialect, its meanings and expressions to the best of my ability. I must admit my own lack of confidence in the full accuracy of my revisions, since I'm not a social-cultural insider in Black communities of practice.

In this process, which took two to three hours per hour of recorded audio, I conducted open, or initial coding, highlighting, marking up transcripts, and writing up initial memos, to identify possible themes. I then inputted the transcriptions into the qualitative software program Dedoose (and Atlas t.i.) for further coding and analysis. Coding is an iterative process, requiring multiple readings of each transcript, as themes must be cross-referenced across all collected data to evaluate importance and validity, and often take much more than a year for the entirety of transcribed text I collected.

⁵ It should be noted that just the interview component of qualitative projects of this scope often takes multiple years without employing a research team. See for example: (Hardie 2022; Pugh 2009; Silva 2012). Furthermore, we acknowledge there are limitations to our sampling, and additional research is necessary to better capture age grades and range of creative practices.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA AND DISCUSSION

The *Creatives Count*, as discussed earlier, did not provide a good understanding of the lives of Black creatives due to lack of representation (in the survey) and emphasis on quantitative data. The demographic information provided here offers a summary understanding of the creatives in this study. The demographic figures should not be taken to be representative of the Black creative population. It is worth repeating that the strength of qualitative research is depth and intimacy, which may come at the cost of generalizability.

Demographic classifications generally offer shallow snapshots of participants, at a specific moment in the course of people's lives. They do not capture temporality – changes in status, condition, or identity at different points in people's life course, for example. Furthermore, categories generally used in surveys, while of significant value, may not always be analytically self-evident or transparent, as they may not reflect emic (insider or native) understandings. Accordingly, complex categories of interest, such as entrepreneurship and class background, are difficult to discern from simple quantitative tabulations, but must be inferred through context and narrative.

In my analysis, demographic information was assembled by both asking direct questions and interpreting creatives' stories. It is through analyzing in-depth narratives complex meanings can be drawn, theorized, and compared.

AGE

Sixty-three were in the age range 18–33; twenty were at the cusp of the higher end of the target range, at 34–36; and seventeen were over the range at 36 or more. As mentioned, the older range of interviewees was solicited through theoretical sampling to get a better picture of possible career paths for Black creatives in the region. Interviews with older participants showed that creative careers become increasingly constrained with the addition of responsibilities related to one's life course – marriage, children, home ownership, for example. Most have not lost their passion for their chosen creative practice, but, as was expected, they had few opportunities to develop fully self-sufficient creative careers.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Forty-six identified as women, forty-nine as men, six as non-binary, and one as transgender male. Sixteen identified as queer⁶ (not conforming to normative expectations for gender and/or sexuality).

Queer-identified creatives experienced racialized discrimination, as could be expected, but were further burdened by marginalization related to gender and sexuality. Their intersectional identities complicated their relationships with both Black and White organizations and communities. Several Black queer creatives remarked they felt unwelcome in queer spaces because of their blackness, but they also felt unwelcome in Black spaces because of their queer identification. They felt tension between Black and queer aspects of their identity.

⁶ The numbers do not seem to fit because queer can encompass both gender and sexual orientation.

For example, a young male visual artist recalled, “they’re all a part of me, but it feels sometimes I’m having to choose which side of I want to bring out more.” He was explaining how he navigated different racialized spaces. About White spaces, he said, “I know how to make White people comfortable, but I know the moment I start saying things a certain way, you can tell the person’s clenching.” But he pointed out it was similar in certain Black spaces. “I found I have to be careful about being as open about my queerness as well.” Others described wondering whether White organizations invited them to share their work because they were Black or because they were queer. There were very few spaces where they could be their full selves – Black, queer and any other facet of their identities.⁷

RACE

All participants identified as Black. However, nine specified biracial, Black and White, and four biracial, Black and other (3 Asia and 1 Middle East).

Identifying as Black is not straightforward. Narratives suggest that identification with Blackness and “Black culture” was an important factor in the ways participants made sense of their identity as creatives and engaged with Black creative networks in the region. Even some who stated they were “biologically” Black had struggled with connecting with Black cultural identity at some period in their lives.

For example, Black creatives who grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods and/or attended predominantly White schools wrestled with racial belonging. Their speech, dress and cultural tastes, they

explained, set them apart from others. Colorism, too, was impactful in this regard.

A few women mentioned how school peers mistreated them because of their light complexion, and how they continued to be discriminated against in their creative work. Conversely, there were creatives who experienced heightened prejudice because they were darker complected.

More than a few explained they found racial belonging through participation in Black creative worlds. A visual artist recalled how they found their place in St. Louis and affirmed their Black identity through connecting with the region’s creatives. They grew up across the river in a predominantly White small town in Illinois and among nearly all White peers.

Because of this, they had long struggled with their racial identification. When they moved to the city as an adult, they struggled to find their place. They now work to build community around Black creatives by establishing support structures, such as venue space and access to equipment, even at considerable personal financial cost.

Such stories underscore Black identity is not uniform but complex, contested and multiform. Furthermore, there is enough to suggest that Black creativity and creative practices play important roles in the construction of Blackness and creative communities.

⁷ Unfortunately, I was only able to capture a small part of Black queer creatives’ experiences because it was not an emphasis in the original research plan. Consequently, I’ve missed an important dimension in the area’s art worlds. Further research would be extremely valuable for a more complete understanding of the region.

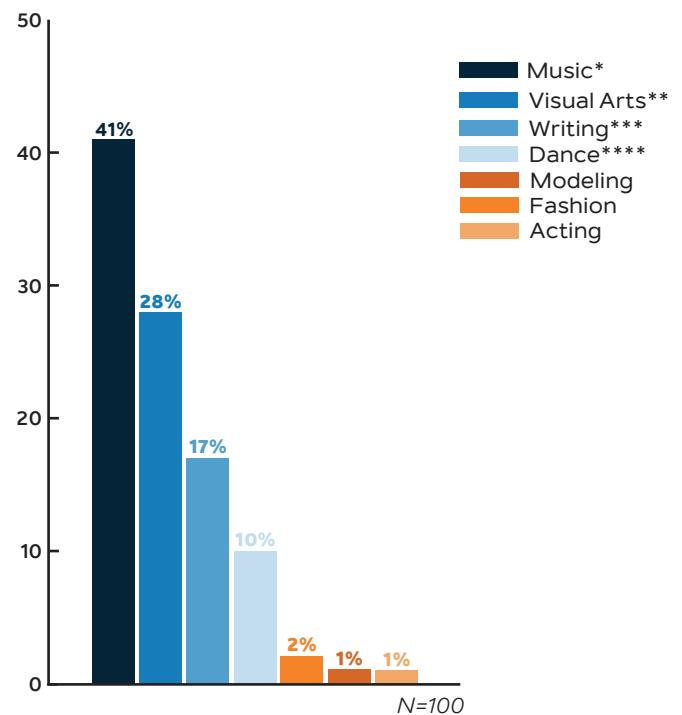
DISCIPLINE

Much like in the *Creatives Count*, participants represented a range of creative practices and were engaged with multiple creative fields. Only one, in fact, identified with a singular discipline. I, therefore, divided creatives by what they indicated as their primary practice. The criteria by which they defined their primary practice were often unclear, however. More often than not, it was more a matter of social/creative identity, such as associations with personal history and affective attachment, than actual time devoted to the practice or amount of remuneration. For example, someone who identifies as a dancer may spend more time on and earn more through photography, videography and video editing.

Furthermore, within any one category, there may be multiple, distinct practices. For example, within the field of music, creatives may describe themselves as some combination of producer, composer, sound engineer, instrumentalist, singer, and more. This does not include other vital activities related to their creative work: accounting, promotion, content production for social media, graphic design, etc. How and why creatives manage numerous and diverse creative practices and related activities are important questions for later discussion.

In *the Count*, two disciplines stood out, representing the majority of creative practices: visual arts (40%) and music (18%). In this study, those two disciplines were also the most prominent, but the

FIGURE 1: DISCIPLINES REPRESENTED



*Singer, songwriter, producer, instrumentalist, etc.

**Graphic design, painting, screen printing, photography, videography, and film

***Poetry, spoken and written, and fiction, screenplays, etc.

****Choreography

rates were reversed: music (41%) and visual arts (28%).

Sampling methodology may have led to sampling bias. Snowball sampling, for instance, may have limited the pool of possible practices because of the composition of their creative networks.

But given this weakness, our sample still suggests an important line of inquiry: how are Black creative networks composed and bounded (for instance, by age, race, practice, and genre) and how do Black creatives identify with specific practices?⁸

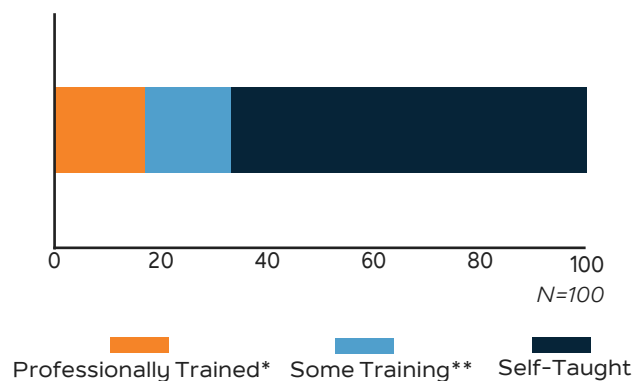
⁸ In the next stage of this project, sampling methods will need to be revised to obtain more balanced representation of creative practices, and life history interviews supplemented with network analysis interviews (see Crossley 2015).

TRAINING

In our interviews, many Black creatives remarked they were mostly self-taught, often mentioning “YouTube University” (often in a light, unserious manner).⁹ This finding, I propose, is related to a broad value placed on self-reliance and what some described as the city’s “DIY” and hustle culture. Self-taught in this sense is related to the value of being self-made. It also suggests a consequential feature of their approach to their creative practices and career. It implies a pragmatic adaptation to chronic lack of resources, both formal and informal, and limitations in social capital (or social networks).

From the interviews, I was able to reconstruct three broad categories regarding their primary discipline. Here, being self-taught doesn’t exclude informal peer support or learning from social media personalities.

FIGURE 2: TRAINING BACKGROUND



*Completed formal, comprehensive training at college, graduate school, and/or another program

**Taken sporadic classes in high school, college, and/or independent program

The supplementary skills, both creative and non-creative, discussed in the prior section were nearly all self-taught, according to the creatives. I’d propose that this speaks to the ad hoc manner Black creatives develop their creative

paths. While I do not have a reference for comparison, that such a large percentage of Black creatives are self-taught may suggest a general lack of personal resources and underdevelopment of professional development infrastructures available to them. One glaring area of deficiency is access to entrepreneurial knowledge and skills (discussed further below).

CLASS

Class is notoriously difficult to discuss. Before the “Great Recession” (2008), most would’ve avoided the topic, denying its relevance to the American way of life. It is a public secret, “a source of public embarrassment to acknowledge” (Fraser 2018, 4). Issues around family finances are usually held as deeply private, and such talk are seen as breaking a “sacred trust” (Zaloom 2021, 207). Class is also famously difficult to define. Is it an objective or subjective reality? Is it rank, status, attitude, tribe, culture, taste? Or is it just money? In most social scientific studies, class is approximated through a combination of proxy variables, including education, income, occupation, and wealth.

In addition, class is not transparent. We cannot assume we all share the same meanings for words like “poor” or “middle class.” Class belonging especially – how individuals understand their place relative to others – is difficult to enumerate into discrete categories, and those categories are more arbitrary than a clear indication of experience. Adding to its complexity, class is neither stable nor fixed status.

⁹ The importance of social media in Black creatives’ training and career development raises important questions about the racial “digital divide”, and how they both access the internet and use specific platforms. (I’d like to thank Mk Sadiq for raising this issue.)



Saint Louis Dance Theatre

The quality of people's lives changes with changing fortunes (e.g., unemployment, illness and death, natural disasters) and life cycle events (marriage, divorce, birth of children). Stability and change, therefore, are important considerations as we evaluate class and its repercussions on creatives' lives.¹⁰

Class, in some manifestation, permeates our daily lives and shapes our life chances. It impacts where we live, how we are educated, how we aspire, how healthy we are, and numerous other significant measures of life quality (see Purnell et al. 2015).

An understanding of class background is necessary to begin to answer an important question raised by *Creatives Count*. Why are Black creatives faring worse than their White counterparts? Unpacking class is vital because class mobility (or lack thereof) and access to resources (economic, social and cultural) are highly correlated with social-economic circumstances of parent(s)/guardian(s). It would help us to better contextualize their creative

aspirations and approaches to their practices. While the *Count* collected data on current income and educational attainment, it did not gather information on the specific class conditions under which they were raised and schooled. In my interviews, I paid particular attention to creatives' stories and demographic indices related to class background.

For example, I asked questions about childhood neighborhoods and experiences at school. In a region as highly segregated as St. Louis, childhood residence and school district strongly index class and life chances (Cambria, et al. 2018). Where we were raised and went to school have strong effects on social-economic mobility (Chetty 2015). I also inquired about who were primarily responsible for raising them, parents' (or guardians') education and occupation, housing, and any disruptions, financial or otherwise, to the stability of their family lives. Still, the assignment of class status is an estimation, and my interest is in understanding Black creatives' own class identification, not an objective classification.

Not all interviewees were forthcoming or direct in their answers; some were evasive and reluctant. Because class conversations, as mentioned above, are

¹⁰ It is important to note that my discussion is not to prioritize class over race. Rather, class is complexly entwined with race, and given the history of this country, class cannot be fully understood without considering race. It is an intersectional experience and identity, which means Black poverty is not experienced the same as White poverty because of the ways race and class differences manifest in the social, material and environmental conditions in which people grow up and live (Massey and Denton 1998). For instance, middle class Blacks are more likely to live in less affluent, less resourced neighborhoods than their White counterparts, with all of the related social-economic consequences on health, wealth, and social mobility (Alba et al. 2000; Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Pattillo 2005). In addition, the Black middle class is much more insecure than its White counterpart – more vulnerable to downward mobility (Ford 2023; Kochhar 2022; Paige 2022).

generally absent from mainstream American culture, we often do not know how to talk about it. This does not mean that class goes completely unspoken; it is often instead displaced into other culturally important categories and narratives, especially those about race, gender, geography, and morality (Ortner 2006, 20). Contemporary discussions about social welfare and crime are salient examples of conflating class differences with racial, geographic and moral differences.

I asked creatives, for example, how they'd characterize their class upbringing. A large majority of them (60) responded middle (22) and lower-middle class (38). The next largest group described themselves as growing up poor (37). A small minority (4) stated they grew up in the upper-middle class. I prodded further, asking whether they could recall periods when their parent(s) or guardian(s) struggled financially.

Many who identified as part of the middle class replied they did remember times when power was turned off, they boiled water for cooking and cleaning, took "bird baths," or ate the same meager meals of cheese sandwiches or instant noodles for several days. A few told of having to temporarily live with relatives and a small number described bouts of homelessness. They often underscored there were times when they were solid and others when things were tight. When contextualized with the rest of their life histories, there were too many complications to assign a class category with certainty.

How many Black creatives spoke about financial challenges during their youth was often framed to preserve the moral

reputation of their parents and/or guardians. Considering class a moral identity is not unusual. The cultural resonance of middle-class is due in part to the moral qualities associated with it such as to be hardworking and self-reliant.

Nearly all those who shared memories of financial hardship qualified their stories, emphasizing when they were younger, they didn't really see it. Their parent(s) "hid it well," a majority said. As one young musician explained, he did see his mother struggling at times, but she did what she could to not show that. Even when they acknowledged parent(s) struggled, that they may have been "poor," they did not have "poor lives."

Their parent(s) provided food, shelter, clothing. They may not have had all the "extras" and had to "rock hand-me-downs", they still had what they needed. One female singer commented, "You know, it's like that Tupac line, it's like ... "mama made miracles every Thanksgiving." Rather than any resentment or finding fault, nearly all expressed gratitude and maintained respect for parent(s) or guardian(s).



Cherokee Street Jazz Crawl

CHILDHOOD NEIGHBORHOOD AND HIGH SCHOOL

Class differences are made manifest in residence and education. Ninety (of 100) were born and raised in the St. Louis metropolitan region. Ten relocated to the area either in their youth or after high school. Only two relocated to pursue employment or creative opportunities as working adults in their mid to late twenties. Seventy-two grew up in the area and lived in predominantly Black neighborhoods.

Of the seventy-two who grew up in Black neighborhoods, sixty-three attended predominantly Black or racially mixed schools. Of the twenty-eight who attended predominantly White schools, nine had participated in the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC; or desegregation program).

FIGURE 3A: CHILDHOOD NEIGHBORHOOD BACKGROUNDS OF BLACK CREATIVES

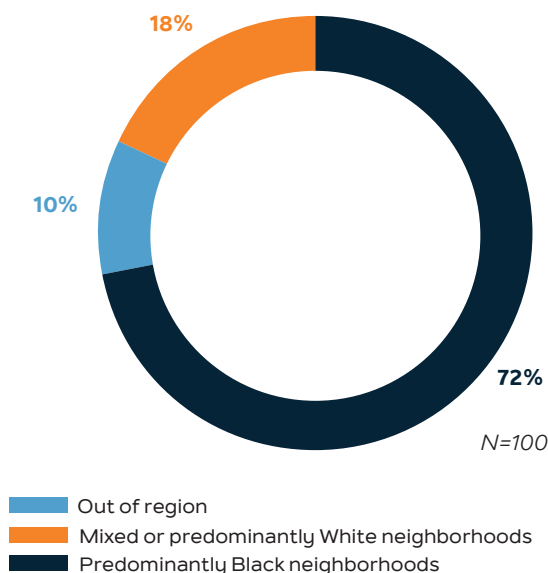


FIGURE 3B: PREDOMINANTLY BLACK OR MIXED HIGH SCHOOL BACKGROUNDS

Christian Brothers College High School	1
Crossroads College Preparatory School	1
Central Visual and Performing Arts High School	6
Gateway STEM High School	5
Grand Center Arts Academy	1
Hazelwood West/Central/East**	10
Jennings High School	3
Lutheran North High School*	3
McCluer/McCluer North/South Berkeley	7
McKinley Classical Leadership Academy High School	2
Metro Academic and Classical High School*	5
Normandy High School	4
Ritenour High School	1
Riverview Gardens High School	1
Roosevelt High School	3
Soldan International Studies High School	2
Sumner High School	1
University City High School	4
SLPS***	1

N=63

*Described as racially and ethnically diverse

** Each of the Hazelwood High schools are known to have distinctive cultures, shaped by the racial composition of the school and its proximity to White and more affluent neighborhoods. For example, creatives mentioned Hazelwood West had the reputation of being "whiter" and more moneyed.

***Indicated St. Louis Public School without specifying

A quick perusal of those schools and school districts reveal that most had lived in relatively poorer, disinvested areas and attended under-resourced public institutions.¹¹ Peoples' lives are always more complex than they seem, however. It is important to listen to how creatives speak about their neighborhoods, schools, and city, if we are to understand their experiences and how they've come to see themselves.

Not a few spoke about violence and the presence of gangs. Some recalled parents sequestered them in their houses, rarely given permission to freely play in their neighborhoods. Others shared how they learned to be cautious on the streets, always aware of unfamiliar cars and people. And several mentioned, hesitantly, they had lost friends and family. But they also made it a point to talk about caring neighbors and friends' parents, about the block parties that brought people together, and about the teachers who went out of their way to guide and protect them.

For example, one young female poet's story left a strong impression. A graduate of Normandy High School in the late twenty-teens, she reflected "Normandy was definitely a violent place," remarking on the frequent fights that broke out in the cafeteria. She and her friend ultimately decided to eat lunch in one of the classrooms with the teachers. "But there was also this other side." She explained how she was fed academically, and how "there were teachers" who "were just really great at connecting and creating those relationships and making it feel like a safe-ish environment."

When one of her parents passed away, she said her high school teachers collected money so she could pay for funeral arrangements. This happened after she had graduated, left the city, and was attending a four-year university.

While I do not want to overcorrect and suggest this is a universal experience among the young Black creatives, there were enough such stories to complicate any simplistic conclusions about Black schools and spaces.

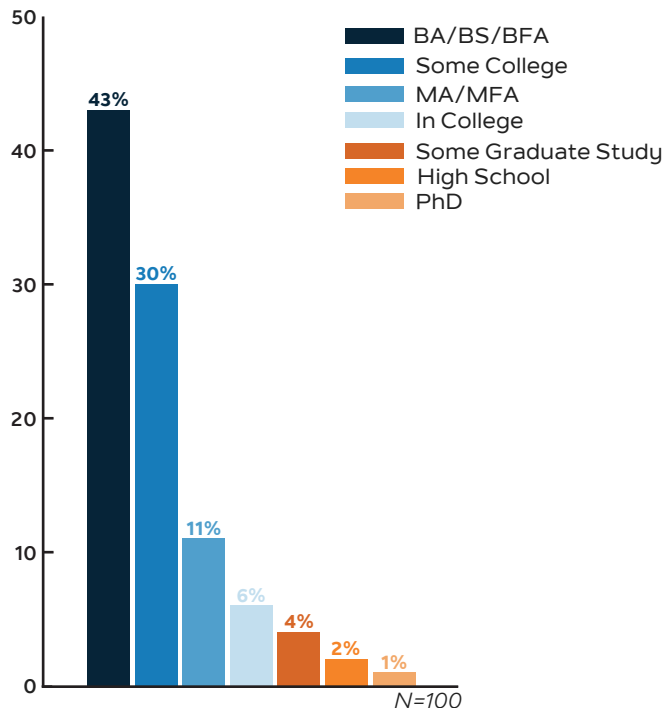
Conversations about schooling also revealed that parents financially sacrificed to send children to private elementary and/or middle schools or relocated the entire family to better school districts further West in the County if able. Another interesting and noteworthy finding is that of this group of Black creatives, at least twelve said they were identified as "gifted," but not all were able to take advantage of gifted programs or attend more academically rigorous schools.

Considering a good majority of Black creatives went to challenged schools, their rates of college attendance and educational attainment are remarkable. Again, while we cannot draw broad conclusions about Black creatives as a whole, the highly skewed rates from our sample suggest a noteworthy finding. Two had only graduated from high school.

¹¹ As we consider the significance of this finding, we should not be quick to judgment or assume it an indication of a type or category of racialized experience. In popular culture Black spaces are often mistakenly associated with "ghetto". However, ghetto is less an actual physical space than a mental space, a symbol of racial difference (Anderson 2023; Lipsitz 2011). Furthermore, as discussed above, Black middle-class families are more likely to live in or near poorer Black neighborhoods.

The rest (of whom I have information about) had at least attended some college:

FIGURE 3C: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF BLACK CREATIVES



To give this finding some context, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2022 (most recent data), college enrollment rate for White 18 to 24-year-olds was 41% and for Black youth was 36%. Nearly one hundred percent of Black creatives had at least some college. We can qualify this finding by evaluating the kind of higher education, whether private, for-profit, or public. However, the point here is that this finding aligns with other studies that show Black families highly value education and parents are actively involved in their children’s education, contravening dominant stereotypes (PEW 2015).

Childhood Stability

In Black creatives’ discussions of their class upbringing, what stood out was less class standing than class instability. As mentioned above, many described

moving in and out of what they perceived to be somewhere on the middle-class spectrum. The distance between somewhere in the middle, of relative “abundance,” to “complete poverty,” as one described his experience, was small. In the interviews there were numerous indications of class precarity.

Research on this matter is clear: middle class Black Americans are more likely to experience downward mobility than other racial and ethnic groups (Kochhar and Sechopoulos 2022). There are significant disparities in rates of unemployment, median household income, and wealth. A policy brief summarized:

Black median income is nearly \$30,000 lower than the White median, and still below the White median income of 1972. At about \$45,000, Black median wealth keeps a large majority of African Americans substantially distant from the \$190,000 estimated to be the lower limit of middle-class wealth. (Austin and Asante-Muhammad 2024).

Wealth is particularly noteworthy. Black families were disallowed from accumulating wealth by home ownership through legal and illegal segregation policies and practices (Cambria et al. 2018). Without opportunities to build economic foundations across generations, Black middle-class families have been vulnerable to falling down the social-economic ladder (Ford 2023).

We should not have to be reminded that Black creatives in our study grew up in areas with lower rates of Black home ownership and lower housing prices relative to predominantly White neighborhoods.

Another factor in Black precarity less talked about is the rate of single-parent families. Single-parent families are much more

vulnerable to economic precarity.¹² They tend to have fewer resources and less capacity to weather economic and family misfortune. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of single parents are women (80 percent in the United States), who continue to face gross gender inequalities in employment (Parolin and Lee 2022, 208–209). Public policies have been unable to address these challenges, failing to provide sufficient funding for childcare and other social welfare services.

In the interviews, forty-nine Black creatives were quite explicit, stating they were mostly raised by a single parent or guardian. Of those, forty-three were raised by their mothers, and the rest by fathers, grandmothers, and other relatives. While, as I have repeated, this sample is not representative, in this specific instance the finding appears to parallel neatly with national statistical averages. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, in 2023 nearly half (49.7%) of Black children lived with one parent (“Living Arrangements of Children,” 2023). Only one in five White children (20.2%) lived with a single parent.

As we consider the finding, it is crucial to contextualize this information. A persistent myth about Black families is about absent fathers. It is a story legitimized by the controversial “Moynihan Report” (1965) and propagated through media as well as policy. A comprehensive CDC survey, however, questions this finding (Jones et al. 2013). The majority of Black fathers do live with their children (2.5 million of about 4.2 million in 2013). The report also concluded that those Black fathers (who live with their children) are the most involved compared to White and Hispanic peers.

For example, regarding children under five years of age, “Black fathers (70%) were most likely to have bathed, dressed, diapered, or helped their children use the toilet every day compared with White (60%) and Hispanic fathers (45%)” (Jones et al. 2013, 6). With children between the ages of 5 and 18, Black fathers were also more likely to have been involved in their activities and helped them with homework. Even among “non-coresidential” dads, Black fathers were more involved than their White counterparts (Levs 2015).¹³

Black families face considerable trials. In general, they are more likely to be headed by single parents, reside in economically challenged neighborhoods, unable to accumulate sufficient wealth, and educate children in under-resourced schools. Consequently, Black families experience disproportionately high rates of downward mobility, and middle-class Black children are much less likely to be able to maintain their class position (Kochhar 2024; Paige 2022).

My interview data evince similar patterns. At the same, we should admire the resilience of Black parents and their children, given those harsh challenges. Consider, for example, Black creatives’ educational aspirations and attainment, and their compassion and respect for their parents’ handling of financial struggles.

¹² *Precarity is used here as an expansive term that encompasses the complexity of the experience of economic vulnerability, including the “correlated challenges of care work, unemployment, poverty, food hardship, and subjective well-being” (Parolin and Lee 2022, 208).*

¹³ *The statistical discrepancies between surveys about single parent households and fatherhood suggest that statistical measures have yet to capture the full complexity of black family lives. For instance, often “single woman” or parent refers to being unmarried but having unmarried parents do not mean a child is fatherless (Levs 2017). Moreover, we should not forget the role of father figures, those who may not be biological fathers but are involved in care and mentorship. In my interviews, Black creatives mentioned the importance of stepfathers and mothers’ partners in their lives. In addition, Black fathers may be in and out of their children’s lives due to complicated circumstances, including divorce, relentless racism, job market discrimination, and disproportionate rates of incarceration (Paige 2022, 6).*

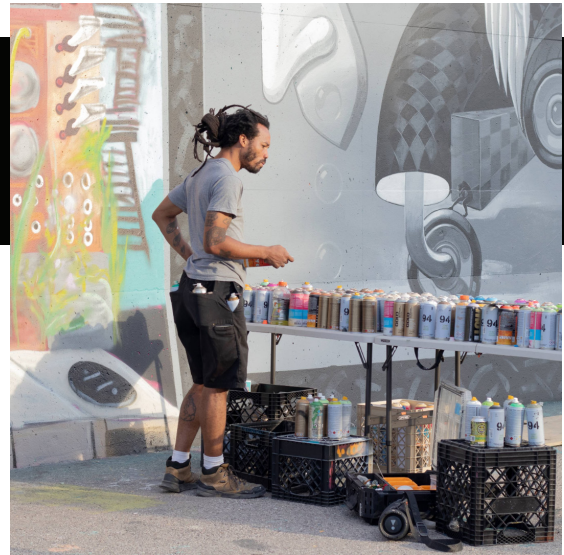
KEY THEMES

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In popular culture, the figure of the entrepreneur is often celebrated, symbolizing the values of a competitive capitalist society (Freeman 2014; Spence 2015). The entrepreneur is a risk-taker but is responsible for their own decisions; is autonomous; is creative; and invests in their own development – their “human capital.” While the entrepreneur may be esteemed, we often forget that only one-half of small businesses survive past five years, less than one-third make it to ten.

Furthermore, when we consider health insurance and other benefits generally tied to formal employment, entrepreneurs are deeply vulnerable. Compound this insecurity with the long history of disinvestment in Black people and communities, which sabotaged their ability to accumulate wealth, and we see a grimmer picture of the “hustle and grind” of entrepreneurial lives (Ravenelle 2023). Why then are Black creatives more likely to identify as entrepreneurs than their White counterparts? What does this suggest in terms of their approach to their creative practices and livelihood?

In assessing the proportion of respondents who marked they pursue their creative practices as owner or co-owner of a business (48%) and those who described their creative work as gig, freelance or contract (47%), the *Count* concluded “most

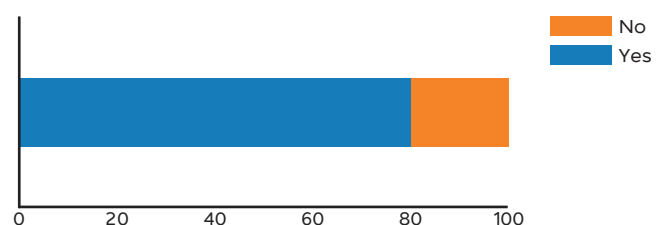


Paint Louis

respondents pursue their creative practices through their own “entrepreneurial efforts” (Carnwath 2023, 21).

Because the survey did not inquire about specific business forms or entities, the *Count* could not distinguish between gig/freelance work and business ownership. In this context the meaning of “entrepreneurial efforts” remains vague. It seems to imply individual ventures to earn through their creative work, regardless of business ownership or entity. Furthermore, while it stated Black creatives were “more likely to own their own businesses and refer to themselves as entrepreneurs,” the rate at which they did so was not explicit (6). My interviews revealed Black creatives overwhelmingly identified as entrepreneurs.

FIGURE 4: BLACK CREATIVES WHO IDENTIFY AS ENTREPRENEURS



N=100

The critical gap in the survey is about meaning. Since it allowed multiple unweighted responses regarding questions of work and role, it was not clear how creatives, regardless of race and ethnicity, rated entrepreneurship amongst other creative work. But most importantly, the *Count* did not elicit information about how creatives understood and valued entrepreneurship as part of their creative work and identity. This question was an important component of my interviews.

Where the *Count* did investigate goals, which implies meaning and value, held by creatives, its scope concentrated on economic motivations. It focused on questions such as whether creatives considered their practice as a primary career; whether they would like their creative activity to be their primary source of income; and whether income is the central motivation for their creative work (16).

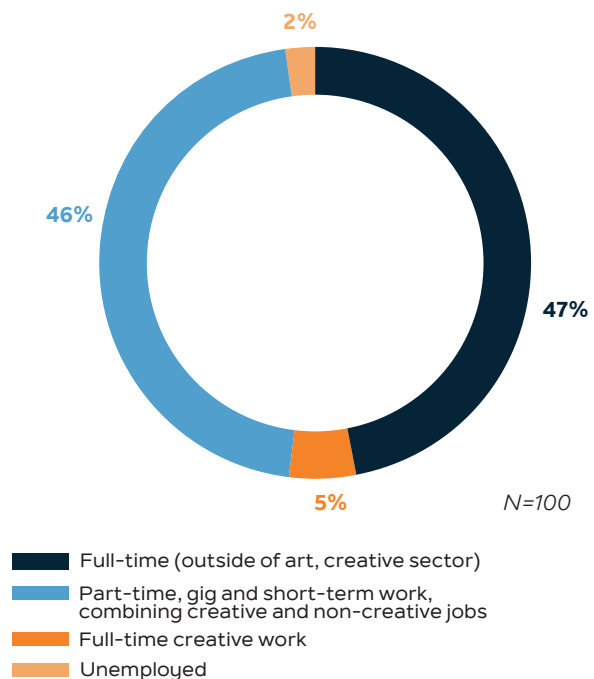
While income and career are important considerations, they do not get at different kinds of motivation (as discussed below) and the meanings associated with entrepreneurship itself. For young Black creatives, what is the attraction to entrepreneurship?

Employment

Livelihood, of course, is an important consideration. As suggested by interview data on creatives' wide-ranging creative practices and activities, employment is not easily pinned down. Most everyone included in this project, including those with full-time occupations (outside and inside the creative sector) do more than one income generating activity or job. Hence, "full-time" is misleading. Furthermore, much of the income

generating work is unstable and temporary and can be defined as gig, short-term, and contract work. Moreover, many creatives move in and out of full-time and long-term jobs. More than a few have quit full-time occupations to devote additional time to their creative pursuits and then returned due to financial pressures and responsibilities.

FIGURE 5: OCCUPATION STATUS OF BLACK CREATIVES



The label full-time creative or artist is also deceptive. The case is not that they have one stable creative enterprise or job. Rather, it is indicative of creatives' intention to concentrate their time and energy on creative work, which take multiple and disparate forms. For example, one creative, who decided to quit their full-time job (outside of the creative sector) to pursue painting (their stated primary discipline) generates income through commissions (painting), caricature drawing, printmaking, illustrations, and vending a range of products, such as stickers and buttons, both in-person at events and festivals and

online. They are active on various social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, to attract and cultivate followers and potential customers.

Black creatives, like most creatives, have complicated economic lives. Most cobble together multiple gigs to make ends meet. If they have full time jobs, they often struggle to find time and the energy to pursue their creative endeavors.

Furthermore, to advance their creative aspirations, they usually require non-creative income. A singer, for example, would need to pay for photo shoots, choreography, production, and promotion. Aside from direct costs, they also invest in personal improvement (such as gym fees and personal training, yoga, therapy, and other wellness practices), which they see as vital to their career development.

Regardless of how they manage their work lives, the vast majority from my interviews wanted to make enough from their creative work to be financially self-sufficient. The few exceptions were those committed to their current full-time jobs in teaching and non-profit education and community engagement, and these tended to be more mature creatives, later in their life course. Given their class backgrounds, educational attainment, and employment history, Black creatives generally lead modest lives, and young creatives struggle for financial stability.

Entrepreneurship and Black Creative Identity

Entrepreneurship is laden with risk, and most Black creatives did not have the financial buffer to withstand failure and misfortune. Why then do so many young Black creatives identify as entrepreneurs?

Analytically, there are two general approaches to this question: the analysis of subjective orientations (or the way people think and feel about the world) and the structural (market conditions, including labor and the creative sector broadly, and the state of specific creative industries). The latter requires further examination, specifically of the regional situation, but scholars have broadly observed the structures for creative production have changed.

Taking the music industry for example, labor sociologist Cornfield argued there's been a shift away from the corporate model of traditional record labels towards a "post-bureaucratic" model (2018). With the advent of social media and alternative modes of production and distribution, the contemporary music scene is in an "entrepreneurial art-making era," wherein artists are themselves responsible for promotion, production and other support functions (2018, 4). Entrepreneurship, from this perspective, is an adaptation to different market and industry conditions. The focus in this analysis is on subjective orientation – how do Black creatives think and feel about their creative practices?

To answer the question about identification, it is first necessary to define entrepreneurship. What does it mean for young Black creatives? The conventional understanding is setting up a business. It is generally taken as starting and running an entity of some kind to generate profit. Some Black creatives have started businesses related to their creative pursuits, such as in marketing, graphic design, and photography. But for most, the business they refer to is the business of

themselves. As one singer stated, “I am a business myself. I’m the brand, and I’m the product.”

This understanding of themselves as a business is neither new nor unique. In Kanye West’s 2005 single “Diamonds from Sierra Leone” Jay-Z rapped, “I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man.” The line is widely remembered as an exultation of the self as brand, which transcends any product or commodity.¹⁴ It echoes a capitalist ethos deeply entrenched in contemporary American culture.

As one astute labor scholar observed, people are no longer defined by the work they do, the businesses they serve, but are encouraged to see themselves as “‘companies of one’, entrepreneurial agents engaged in the constant labor of defining, improving, and marketing the ‘brand called you’” (Lane 2011, 9).¹⁵

As a kind of identity, entrepreneurialism is not simply about self-employment, about owning and running a business; it has come to be associated with positive cultural values of individual industriousness, independence, responsibility, and innovation. It confers upon the person the distinction of ambition, purpose, and respectability.

One male poet remarked it can make you feel good to say you’re an entrepreneur, that you have something going on; “it is a respect kind of thing.” He further explained that, as a young Black male, entrepreneurship can be a vehicle to “refine your image and your identity,” to rehabilitate popular stereotypes. The interviews made it clear that being an entrepreneur was

about value, about their self-worth as much as it was about economic worth. Respect was a common explanation expressed by young Black creatives. It is a common theme in academic studies of young Black lives, particularly of impoverished urban settings. According to sociologist Elijah Anderson (2000, 67), respect may be understood as a kind of cultural capital that is highly valued among those who have been denied other forms of honor or prestige. He reasoned, because of their alienation from mainstream society and so-called violent competitiveness among inner-city Black youth, it forms the core of their self-esteem, their sense of self (67).

I’m hesitant to extend this analysis to all Black youth; moreover, I have strong reservations about reifying stereotypes of inner-city or ghetto-specific culture (see Wilson 1987). But what resonates in my interviews is the persistent disrespect many Black creatives have experienced.¹⁶

¹⁴ *It is important to note that the song is not an uncomplicated celebration of entrepreneurialism. Jay-Z’s part in the song is set in counterpoint to a story of blood diamonds. In fact, it can be read as a commentary on the ambivalence of Black capitalist success.*

¹⁵ *Work had a powerful moral pull, granting qualities like independence and self-sufficiency – virtues that had no equal in American society (Newman 2009). With the decided shift to a post-industrial, service economy, and normalization of layoffs and job insecurity, employment (formal work for another) had begun to lose its luster.*

¹⁶ *This theme of entrepreneurship as a reaction to oppression has a long history. German sociologist Max Weber made this point in 1904 in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. It also has deep roots in Black American writing, rhetoric and scholarship. For example, Booker T. Washington’s project for racial uplift promoted entrepreneurship and self-reliance. E. Franklin Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie* (1955) may be one of the more controversial statements on Black entrepreneurship. He wrote that Black entrepreneurs live in a world of “make-believe” as a means to shelter from White scorn and to distance themselves from the “Black masses.” Entrepreneurship is also an important theme in understanding immigrant experiences; for example, many have theorized that cultural dispositions are a factor in the concentration of Korean immigrants in businesses serving poor Black communities (Light and Bonacich 1991).*

Rather than simply self-esteem or cultural capital, I propose to think of respect (and conversely disrespect) as a kind of cultural recognition of young Black creatives' full complex selves – as Black selves. Disrespect may not take the form of explicit insult; more commonly, it entails not being seen in their full authenticity or personhood.

In our conversations about entrepreneurship, young Black creatives talked about freedom, about being their own boss, about building something with their own hands, about doing what they want to do. These kinds of statements are common, regardless of race. Like anyone else, they want to be able to control their time and their labor. But if we listen more carefully, we begin to hear that “freedom” rings differently among Black creatives and youth.

Many spoke about the emotional and psychological toll of navigating White spaces, institutions, and workplaces. There is subtle but incessant pressure to assimilate White cultural norms and expectations, to do the “White thing,” as one remarked. At the very least, it is necessary to code switch, to present oneself, as a few creatives described it, as a “palatable Negro,” in speech, demeanor and White deference. Accordingly, they aspire to be in spaces where they can be themselves, be “authentic,” as so many repeated.

Authenticity, as was explained to me, is not simply about pride in one's race. It is also about well-being. It is about comfort, confidence and the conditions to flourish as a complete person. These sentiments have been long echoed in Black and critical race



WerQfest

studies, from DuBois' conceptualization of “double consciousness” and the “veil” (DuBois 1903) to Fanon's diagnoses of psychological pathologies among the colonized (Fanon 1952).¹⁷

In addition to the desire for their authenticity, Black creatives also indicated a lack of trust in White institutions. One female creative explained, “I chose entrepreneurship because I don't trust that a job can sustain me mentally, physically, financially.” To elaborate she said at her current job she's the only Black female in the office, and she's experienced micro-aggressions. “I have to be flexible and be able to pivot in case this job doesn't want this Black face here, or that they no longer need a Black token.”

She continued, there's so much pressure to be professional, to present as someone intelligent and together. “I need to cry, I need to fight, I need to

¹⁷ Interviews suggest there is a subtle but deep connection between Black creative art worlds and Black wellness movements in the St. Louis region. I am currently researching this connection as well as the emergence of “Black joy” as a topic of creatives' concern.

[do] whatever I'm feeling, you know. So sometimes I'll just dance. Sometimes I'll skate. Sometimes I'll paint." Their creative pursuits may then also be understood as means of self-care and, I'd argue, not simply as a reprieve from racism but also as vehicles for creating Black joy (Stainova 2022).

In seeing themselves as a business, it is not all about identity and well-being. There is also a crucial pragmatic dimension to their identification. As Black creatives strive to make a living through their creative work, they learn they need a host of skills and knowledge outside of their creative ken, from marketing to budgeting, taxes, and intellectual property rights.

To be able to do their creative work, they must expend considerable time and effort learning and doing those business-related tasks. And for the most part, they do those activities with little external support.

Furthermore, in learning those skills, they've also come to appreciate how much of their lives are financially

wrapped up in sustaining their creative practices, from purchasing materials, developing artistically, budgeting time, to administering their day-to-day expenses. All of those activities, they find, must be incorporated into their financial record-keeping for taxing and other purposes.

An older, established artist observed "a lot of black creatives by default are business owners because we have to be. I, myself, am a business owner, and it's because I've had to find a way." He was referring to being a consultant as an example to discuss how to write off travel and other expenses on taxes.

Given all they have to do to financially survive and sustain their creative aspirations, young Black creatives feel they have little choice but to become entrepreneurs. One young Black rapper and poet, when asked about identifying as an entrepreneur strongly agreed, "Yeah, absolutely [...]" If you want to make a career out of your artistry, you have to be an entrepreneur. You have to be a businessperson. It's not optional unless you got somebody that's going to do that work for you."

In probing further about the way they approach their creative practices, I found many creatives associate entrepreneurship with hustling. Hustling, from their perspective, is not simply makeshift. It is innovative, ambitious, and multifaceted. It is about the serious work of making a living under difficult circumstances. In describing their hustling as entrepreneurial, they're also claiming their creative work isn't merely dilettantism. It is an earnest,



Brewed Arts Festival

professional endeavor. Reflecting on his collective's discussions, one musician stated, "You can't just think as a creative; hey, we get together, we make songs, we post them. Where has that gotten us so far? We shouldn't stop doing that, but you have to realize that this has to make money. It has to, or we're just going to be doing this as a hobby."

Furthermore, they want to be treated as entrepreneurs, by which they mean they also want to be treated in a serious manner. Many Black creatives I interviewed spoke about being asked to work for free or being low-balled, and many I engaged with outside the formal study at public events said the same. As a corroborative example from my ethnographic observations, a fashion designer (who was not interviewed for this study) at a public panel told the audience,

Stop asking designers to do stuff for free. They work every day to [make] these clothes. There's no way you should be doing a show and not get nothing. Publicity is not enough. It's not enough. Photos are not enough. That's not what's keeping it going. We gotta buy fabric. We gotta pay for lights and the electricity to keep these machines on.

The dancers and models were the most adamant about getting paid properly in my interviews. One model stated that she felt marginalized when she asked for payment because not only do so many (designers, choreographers, photographers) presume exposure is enough payment, so do many of the models themselves.

For their financial survival, Black

creatives have come to learn to conduct themselves as businesses. For their personal well-being, Black creatives have come to learn to find freedom in entrepreneurship. Vital questions remain regarding their identification as entrepreneurs, however. How do they learn their skills and from whom? Do they learn enough to sustain their creative practices? Initial analysis suggests most learn on their own, through YouTube and from talking with other creatives, who are often just as inexperienced and confused. Many I've talked with feel they lack access to information.

As one dancer and graphic designer poignantly stated at a creatives panel, "information is sacred." Unfortunately, he feels they, Black creatives in general, are locked out of the predominantly White social networks where information and resources circulate.

It will be important to investigate the truth of the sentiment that White social networks hoard information and resources. This is a question of both intent and structural circumstance. We do know Black arts organizations in the region are grossly under-resourced relative to White institutions. Also, the *Count* shows that most creatives in the region struggle to make and sustain sufficient livelihoods, but BIPOC creatives fare worse than their White counterparts.

At the organizational level, as noted in RAC's 2020 strategic plan, there's only one Black arts organization with a budget over \$500,000. Aside from formal arts institutions, are less formal White social networks better resourced? Do White creatives feel similar sentiments of exclusion from networks of influence and wealth?

BLACK CREATIVE NETWORKS

The *Creatives Count* survey found one of the more common complaints held by creatives in general is their lack of access to networks connecting them to social and material support. All seemed to appreciate networks are vital to their success.

Research on social networks corroborate creatives' perceptions. They've shown networks provide social support, help find jobs, influence entrepreneurship, shape social movements, and much more (McLean 2017, 11).

In the following, I provide a brief analysis of Black creative networks. The focus is not on their specific composition and function. Rather, I approach Black creatives' discussions of their networks as an analytic window onto how they perceive competition, relationships with other Black creatives, social conditions for success, and their relationship to the wider arts ecosystem.

In emphasizing perception, it bears repeating that perception is not necessarily accurate from a social scientific view. For example, in the discussion below about cliques, it is unclear whether creative scenes are as fragmented by insular, tightly wrapped groups as typically described. However, because creative scenes are seen that way suggests how people may be navigating creative worlds and the arts ecosystem.¹⁸

Cliques and Crabs

Many Black creatives mentioned that St. Louis is "cliquey." Clique generally

refers to a small exclusive group of people who come together because of common interests or goals. The key term is exclusive, the understanding that groups do not easily allow others to join, and this is the way that creatives used "cliquey" in my interviews. They commonly stated, it all (getting gigs, resources, and other kinds of support) depends on who you know and who knows you.

Interestingly, the same people who had appraised the region as cliquey also described St. Louis as a "very small, big city," noting that "everybody knows everybody."

Many also claimed that, yes, the city is cliquey, but they themselves are not. While these descriptions are not mutually exclusive, they do raise questions about creatives' perceptions and actual social organization of groups.¹⁹ As stated above, perception and social actuality may not align; the question then is why they have such ideas. What do they mean by "cliquey"? There are just as many creatives who disagreed that the scene is as cliquey

¹⁸ I examine networks in this manner because of my interest in creatives' subjective understandings, but also because I recognize the limitations of this study. My interviews touched on networks as one part of their life and work histories but did not delve deeply enough. The next research phase must include focused network interviews, mapping, and analysis to uncover: flows (as well as barriers) of information and resources; network boundaries and the formation of collective identities; conflicts and tensions within groups; and the ways creative networks may overlap with existing social-cultural divisions and categories, including race, class, gender and sexuality, and creative fields and genres. Such an analysis would help us to understand how creative networks are connected to the broader arts ecosystem, including venues, legacy institutions, non-profit arts sector, business firms, and governmental entities.

¹⁹ One additional note, the notion that the city is socially exclusive seems to be shared by many outside creative circles; it seems to be a widely held opinion. What this may signify about the region's culture and social organization warrants additional study.

as people made it out to be. They said they frequently move between and have been involved with lots of different groups. And many who've asserted that creatives are cliquey also shared stories of connecting with different creatives across the city. If there are so-called cliques, a few observed they may just be personal relationships people have organically formed from their neighborhood, high school, or college.

One female rapper observed about the people she works with are just friends she's known since childhood and college, "this is somebody I've known since I was six or somebody I've known for over ten years." She continued, this isn't different from any other cities, mentioning popular artists who've come up together, such as Pharrell and others from Virginia Beach and Nelly and the St. Lunatics from University City.

I've asked nearly all creatives if it is easy to meet and traverse groups. What does one need to do to meet people? The answer was generally the same. You just need to show up. Go to shows, exhibits, and events and engage with other creatives both online and in-person.

A visual artist who recently began her professional career remarked that she's had many more established creatives support her and give her opportunities. She explained if you show support for others, they will usually support you back. "And as you create that relationship, they'll start suggesting you to things. You'll suggest them [in turn]." She met many through vending events, and they began following each other on Instagram and other platforms.

When you do show up, most are willing to talk with you. The female rapper from

above described the development of her music career:

But like I said, before I started making music, I was going to Slum Fest, and I was going to all the small popup shows, like Mvstermind shows. [...] like Tef Poe or artists like who used to come up around that time, like Bo Dean and that era, I used to go to their shows, and they would see me so often, you know. When you run into somebody so much, then you're like, oh, what's your name? So, I was one of those people. I was just on the scene a lot. So, I started to get to know people, and then I would meet somebody through them. And now I know a lot of people, so it's like it's easier for me to navigate because I'm always going to know somebody that knows somebody.

Many creatives told some variation of her story. In this sense, "clique" may also be about values of reciprocity and mutual aid. Creatives show up for each other.²⁰

If there is difficulty, it isn't usually that others are unfriendly or defensive but that they themselves are shy and uncomfortable in social situations. One dancer recalled how challenging it was to find community, but when she connected with one group, she was able to connect with many others in and outside of the dance community. "I've made so many different networking connections by being, forcing myself to go out and be social." She explained, "I think I built my creative network by learning to be, to get

²⁰ As one reviewer of this report said, this is a vital point to explore. It suggests the ways Black creatives create social groups, the cultural values that hold people together, and how they navigate the arts ecosystem.

comfortable with being uncomfortable because meeting new people for me is very uncomfortable sometimes.” She had to be more intentional in her networking.

The stories about networks young Black creatives reveal that describe creative scenes as cliquey is not so simple. When the charge of being cliquey is levied, I’d argue that it is less about complaints against actual cliques than about the uncertainties regarding career pathways. Why aren’t some creatives getting hired, getting resources, and given grants?

This is not to say it’s simply about rationalization. Rather, it is a way to talk about feelings of competition, limited resources, and lack of creative industries. So, when people talked about cliques, they also compared the city to “crabs in a bucket,” too many creatives competing in a small market.

What clique means may also be the sense that pathways to success and recognition are dark and occluded. As I discussed previously, a large majority of creatives in this study are self-taught. This fact suggests that most participants interviewed have not received either formal or informal mentorship and have not been part of an institution or organization that could’ve provided guidance.

When asked directly about mentorship, a large majority responded they had none. When asked about how they plan to develop their creative work, many responded they did not know, especially when it came to entrepreneurial skills and knowledge. Most plan to keep grinding, networking, and refining their practices. Clique in this regard signifies the obstacles, both known and unknown, many Black creatives have experienced.



The Black Rep

The notion of a clique then is also about gatekeeping. An up-and-coming singer said, “Honestly, I think that’s a really big part of black musicians here, feeling like they’ve been x’d out or boxed out [...] but in reality, St. Louis is a clique city, and unfortunately there are very tiny cliques that have control over certain things.” Many young Black creatives expressed the belief that a few people or groups were controlling access to resources, in particular venues and opportunities to showcase their talents. Several shared their experiences with specific promoters and venue managers, but I could not confirm through this research how widespread gatekeeping may be.

There were enough comments from a range of creatives (by discipline, gender and age), however, to suggest that it was not an uncommon experience, at the very least not an uncommon evaluation of the arts ecosystem. But as I mentioned above, further research is necessary to fully understand how networks are formed and bounded and who specifically act as the main gatekeepers. Is gatekeeping done by other Black creatives? How are they chosen and empowered to exclude and favor creatives,

withholding and offering opportunities, information and other resources?

There is another dimension of gatekeeping that demands discussion. That of course is race. While I cannot comment on specific gatekeepers, I can state with some confidence that networks are highly segregated by race. In other words, Black creatives are part of Black networks and are rarely part of White or equally mixed ones. This was evident in how Black creatives described how they found out about and got gigs. Almost all stated they were largely dependent on their networks for work. It is also evident in the composition of their audience. I acknowledge my sample is heavily biased towards three disciplines. During my research I regularly attended music and dance performances and visual arts exhibitions. I didn't do a systematic count of the audience and relied on superficial visual impressions. However, it was obvious that the vast majority were Black. When asked directly, Black creatives reported their audience was overwhelmingly Black. Not only were they Black, but a good number at any performance were



Frizz Fest

also family members, friends, and other Black creatives. I noted above that it was important to “show up”; attending each other’s performances, exhibits, and events were how they supported each other. In fact, I usually saw a lot of the same people at their shows. Given this finding, it is necessary to confirm how art worlds are racially segregated.

I ended the last section on entrepreneurship with the quote “information is sacred,” noting deep-seated feelings among Black creatives that they’ve been kept from resources commonly held by White people and institutions. This same creative explained in a personal interview, “that’s where we feel gate kept, because it’s like the White community has this wealth of knowledge, and they have wealth. It’s like it may take us decades to even touch that or even know it’s there.” Not a few saw their development was stymied by a lack knowledge about creative industries and how to run a business. As one spoken word artist said, the most talented are often not the most successful; it’s because they don’t have the entrepreneurial skills to build their businesses, that is, their creative selves.

While we generally think of gatekeeping as done intentionally or unintentionally, by groups or individuals, it may also happen structurally. It is now common knowledge that the region is one of the most segregated in the nation, where racial dividing lines are clearly built into the social-economic and political landscape (Gordon 2008). The patterns of Black creatives’ childhood residence and school districts in this study readily map onto the racialized geography of the region. A large majority grew up in predominantly black neighborhoods and

attended predominantly black schools. These spatial divisions also influence social-cultural divisions: who interacts with whom, who works for whom, who creates with whom.

This finding is consistent with other studies of social networks in the US. A 2022 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute found White core friendship networks are the most racially homogeneous: ninety percent of White friendship networks are White (Jones et al. 2023). If there are few ordinary opportunities or incentives to socialize across racial lines, then there are few opportunities to build racially mixed social networks. Accordingly, there are few paths for resources and information to circulate across racial lines.

I started this section by noting how vital networks are to the transmission of information and resources. Racially segregated networks then function as structural gatekeeping. When we take into consideration the deleterious effects of institutionalized racism on Black homeownership, education, and debt, we need consider separate networks are not equal networks. Furthermore, social disconnection between high- and poorly resourced communities act as a barrier for social mobility for low-income people. In fact, research by Chetty and colleagues (Chetty et al., 2022, 108) show economic connectedness (degree of interaction between low- and high- income people) is “among the strongest predictors of upward income mobility identified to date.” In other words, separate networks may have critical social-economic consequences for Black creatives from under-resourced neighborhoods.

One of the staple questions in my interview schedule is whether Black creatives cannot

just survive but thrive relying on only Black networks.²¹ A few, who were deeply committed and involved in Black organized movements and non-profit organizations, declared that it was possible; this was a political stance as much as it was an opinion. The majority, however, acknowledged the lack of resources held by Black communities and networks. They cannot match what is owned by White communities and institutions. A longtime observer of Black creatives commented, “If nothing changes about how things run now? Thrive, no. But survive, it is what we’re doing.” She also noted that she doesn’t want to “put a cap on” what creatives can do. “I just know, I know our creativity, and I know our power.”

The *Count* stated it was important to recognize the key individuals at the center of social networks. Through my interviews I identified a number of individuals who have taken it upon themselves to act as social hubs, providing important information and opportunities, mentorship, and vitally a feeling of community. I list a few here because they are public figures: Mvstermind; Chris Loss (People’s Art and Recreation Center); Quintrel Brown and Dwayne Ferguson (Kre8Place); Anthony Redd Williams (Kode Redd Dance Studio); and Tre’Von Griffith (werQfest).

A more ethnographic approach, long-term field observation, focused on their day-to-day work (e.g., how they connect, the kinds of services they provide, funding models and operations, etc.) would be invaluable to this project. Moreover, it is necessary so we can understand how we can assess their impact and best support their work.

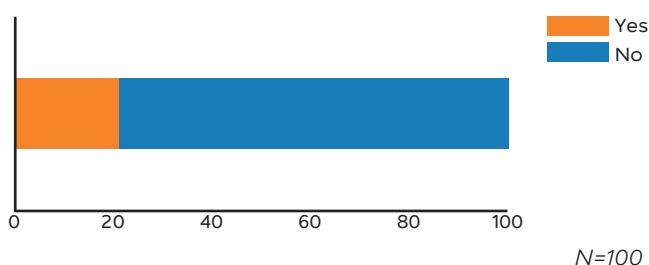
²¹ I agree with a reviewer’s observation that no creative community thrives in a silo. I’d like to thank this reviewer for their close reading and valuable commentary. As the *Count* showed, White creatives also struggle financially and with building their careers. Given this is the case, it’s important to understand how Black and White creatives are or are not connected.

AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT WITH ARTS ECOSYSTEM

The *Count* raised the question as to why so many creatives who have a need for financial resources do not apply for grants (from the survey only 34% applied for grants). It then proposed “it will be valuable to gain a deeper understanding of how creatives perceive and interact with grant programs.” I found most Black creatives have little knowledge about grants and granting agencies, raising the vital question as to how information about grants and the arts ecosystem as a whole circulate and are received.

From my interviews, I estimated that much like the *Count*, a small percentage had applied for RAC and other grants.

FIGURE 6: BLACK CREATIVES WHO HAVE APPLIED FOR GRANTS



In addition to grant application, I explored Black creatives’ awareness of the arts ecosystem as a whole. Many may have heard about but were unfamiliar with the idea of an arts ecosystem. Furthermore, a large majority had little knowledge of arts institutions in the region aside from some of the region’s more popular ones: the Saint Louis Art Museum, The Muny, Blues

Museum, Jazz St. Louis, etc. What is significant here is that this awareness does not require any specialized knowledge about the arts sector; it’s just general knowledge promoted to everyone. In addition, few could name arts non-profits and grant organizations other than RAC. Those aware of RAC had heard about the organization and its grants but knew little else about it.

If Black creatives replied they knew of RAC and its mission, I asked why they (and others in their network) did not apply for its grants. Three answers consistently stood out. One, they were not confident in grant writing; two, they didn’t trust White institutions, and three they identified as entrepreneurs.²² While there are distinctive elements to each, all three overlap in significant ways.

On the first, many voiced their ignorance about grantmaking in general and about how applications were evaluated and should be written, more specifically. Few knew people in their personal and professional circles who had experience with grants, and fewer still, who had received grants. For those who had applied for grants, they recalled they didn’t understand the purpose of many of the questions. As one actor commented, “I felt like I was answering the same question in different ways.” A young singer stated, “I realized applying for grants is a whole skill set in itself [...] So I didn’t really finish a lot of the applications because I didn’t, I literally didn’t know how to even phrase a lot of this.”

They realized that grant-writing is a specific skill, and it required fluency in a different kind of language. One established artist, who had sat on grant review boards, saw grants written by Black creatives weren’t nearly as strong as their White competitors.

²² The current President and CEO of RAC is an African American woman, Vanessa Cooksey. The question remains how is it that RAC is seen as a White institution.

He explained, it's "because they don't have the language. They don't have the way you talk in the grant application. No one's taught them how to do that [...] So it's almost like speaking a foreign language."

There was, he argued, a difference in cultural capital – lack of familiarity and comfort with specific cultural norms and practices due to historic lack of opportunities. "So, if you [historically] have been left out of the conversation and you all of a sudden are invited to take part in that conversation, it takes time to know how to have that conversation." This sentiment was repeated by many of the younger creatives I talked with.

There were some who wondered whether the grant application process was purposely made difficult. "It felt like it was hard for the sake of being hard," a female actor remarked. At the very least, it was in a form they had trouble with. A veteran of the music scene who had also sat on review boards recollected "how the rubric and the numbering system kind of eliminates people before they even get a chance to like really get into the project [description], because they don't know how to write persuasively or convey a message through written word."

One arts administrator commented there should be different ways to evaluate creatives, perhaps through oral interviews or video presentations. The standard grant application is biased towards specific kinds of education and experiences. The few who had been successful attributed their success to their education in predominantly White institutions. They said they've come to understand how those institutions function and the language necessary to navigate White spaces. One young creative and recent graduate of a prestigious institution said, "That's one

thing. When you were talking about navigating White spaces that came up for me is that's one thing I can do. I can write a grant, and I know what language to use." From their experience at school, they learned how to "give people what they're looking for." They continued, "So, I think that's one aspect of like going to these predominantly White institutions that has been very valuable."

Lack of familiarity, this sense there is a different world they aren't a part of, reinforced their distrust of what they perceived to be White institutions. A prominent local producer remarked, "And this is where the racial tension really derives [from] because it [grants and money], and nobody [Black creatives] know it exists, and it often feels very protected and very closed off." A poet recalled conversations he had with Black creatives and how they dismissed grants all together. "This shit ain't gonna do shit for us," they said. A few creatives recalled their recent experiences with a grant application. When they received notices that they did not receive the award, they couldn't accept the reasons they were denied. This kind of response is not uncommon for most applicants, but the tenor of Black creatives' statements hinted at feelings of mistrust. Some explained they reviewed the list of recipients and said there were few that were Black and that raised eyebrows.

A female dancer remembered that when she looked over a list of grant recipients "it was zero hip hop artists." In this study, a large percentage of participants' creative work was related to hip hop culture – dance, DJing, and rap. Those practitioners questioned whether review boards were biased against or didn't understand Black culture and art, especially hip hop. One longtime "B-boy" questioned if it's possible to translate street dancing into a suitable

narrative for a grant application. How do you argue for its value and its contribution to the wider community? How do you justify it in monetary terms? A longtime dancer and educator described her experiences applying for grants at an arts forum:

I have to write about a style [hip hop] in a form that literally is against the form itself. [...] You're not going to get a grant unless you can speak eloquently, whatever that means, about your art, in a way that's palatable and understandable for the grant review panel. You ain't going to get it. I'm just going to tell you right now. So, I spend 50% of my time as a professor just trying to like ... is this paragraph just what they want, you know. And I have to explain hip hop every single time.

Another dancer concurred. At a one-on-one interview with this dancer, teacher, and choreographer, she said, "I'm so over grants. Like, I don't think they're a real thing. I don't think they're helpful at all."

I pressed her on this. She elaborated, when she returned to St. Louis, (from Atlanta), she opened her own studio and researched grants to support her profession.

And so, at the time I realized I was in a very interesting position because even though I'm art centered, none of the arts grants applied to me because it was technically a business. And none of the business grants wanted to ... well, I technically didn't qualify for them either, because they were looking for either tech or certain startup companies. And trying to convince them of the validity of ... the importance of a dance studio was ...

She was frustrated. She said she needed money to help with rent and other day-to-day expenses to keep the studio running. Ultimately the studio had to be closed.

This particular account is highly suggestive. In a previous section I affirmed Black creatives' strong inclination to identify as entrepreneurs, and I proposed freedom, autonomy, self-esteem and well-being are some of the reasons they do so. Conceiving and conducting themselves as entrepreneurs, it's highly possible they're less troubled by the longstanding tension between creative and commercial interests. In fact, it's arguable the relatively recent emergence of the term "creative" itself is in part due to the way it blurs art and market identities (McRobbie 2018). As Black creatives organize their creative practices around entrepreneurial concerns, their approach to funding needs may have also changed. Consequently, it's arguable grants, too, must change to meet those new practices and identities.

This section drew attention to young Black creatives' general lack of awareness and engagement with the arts ecosystem. Even those who knew about and/or attempted grant applications express dissatisfaction and distrust. One way to consider this situation is through differences in social and cultural capital (social networks and cultural knowledge). The disparities in social and cultural capital should not be a surprise. It is crucial to understand that opportunities for cultivating social and cultural capital are unequally distributed, and in regions like St. Louis, disparities generally align with patterns of racial segregation.

IMPLICATIONS AND TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

In 1968, in the wake of urban “riots” that exploded in cities across the country, Lyndon B. Johnson established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to investigate their causes and provide policy recommendations. The resultant “Kerner Report” concluded “White racism is essentially responsible,” and it warned, “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one Black, one White – separate and unequal.”

The current conditions of America’s cities is a consequence of the policies and racial animus that had incited the wave of urban unrest from 1964 to 1971 (upwards of seven hundred by some accounts). The protests that erupted after the killing of Michael Brown, Jr. (2014) were fueled in part by the lack of substantive change in the region and across the country.

As the region is deeply segregated, so are creative worlds. This study documented how racially separated creatives are in the region. Black creatives, for the most part, grew up in predominantly Black neighborhoods and attended predominantly Black schools. Given the city’s history, we can safely assume they generally had access to fewer resources than their White peers.

In developing their creative paths, Black creatives are primarily connected to and



St. Louis Mural Project

rely on Black networks for social support, information, job/gig opportunities, and professional development. Furthermore, their audience is also on the whole Black. What are the implications of segregated creative worlds? This situation raises a host of questions for further research and analysis.

Is the creative marketplace also highly divided? What are the consequences on Black creatives’ potential sources of income? Because they rely heavily on Black creative networks for financial support, does money tend to circulate mainly amongst themselves? Since many Black creatives are also struggling to make a living from their work, how can such a market be sustainable? What are the challenges to expanding the audience base across racial/ethnic lines? What is clear is young Black creatives’ prospects – their financial, social, mental and physical well-being – are intimately bound to the racial segregation in the region.

The consequences of racial inequality in the arts ecosystem on the region have yet to be fully appreciated. We know that the art and culture sector make significant contributions to the region's economy. Arts & Economic Prosperity 6, a study of the impact of nonprofit arts and culture organizations and their audiences conducted by the Americans for the Arts, estimated the impact to be \$868 million.

There's also increasing evidence that inequality damages economic growth. Sociologists Benner and Pastor survey of 184 metropolitan areas demonstrated, "... the single largest factor that seems to curtail job growth is initial inequality; not far behind in their impact are racial segregation and metropolitan fragmentation" (Benner and Pastor 2015, 19). This conclusion has been corroborated by the Federal Reserve as well as McKinsey & Co. Consulting.

The arts are not a panacea for social ills. The creative sector can either reproduce racial inequities or serve as a vehicle to promote racial equity beyond the arts ecosystem. It can continue to either hamper or promote regional economic prosperity for all. My hope is that this report begins to help arts organizations critically reflect on and revise their practices and policies to better meet the needs of the current generation of Black creatives.

Furthermore, this study underscores the need to address the deeply rooted divisions – social, cultural, political, economic – afflicting the region, not only because of the harms inflicted on Black communities but also because those schisms undermine the entire region.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This exploratory phase reveals the resilience, innovation, and aspirations of young Black creatives amidst persistent structural barriers. Their narratives underscore the need for:

Increased investment in community-based mentorship and professional development.

- Additional research is necessary to identify and examine the numerous BIPOC-centered organizations that have provided mentorship and development.
- It is vital to recognize Black arts organizations are severely underfunded. According to RAC's recent strategic planning report (2020), "Almost half the citizens of St. Louis are African American, and there are no organizations of color with budgets exceeding \$1 million."

Investment in incubating Black creatives as businesses.

- Black creatives overwhelmingly identify as entrepreneurs and see themselves as businesses, influencing their approach to creative practice, due in part to experiences of social-structural marginalization.
- They need financial support, entrepreneurial knowledge and skills.

Identify and support Black-led creative networks.

- There are creatives who have taken upon themselves to act as social hubs (central network nodes) intentionally reaching out to creatives and providing

information as well as opportunities. They often do so with their own resources despite financial challenges. It is important to identify who they are, what they need, and what their motivations are.

- These are the creatives who also connect creatives to the mainstream arts ecosystem, provide opportunities for professional development, and cultivate collective identity and purpose. They need financial support, entrepreneurial knowledge and skills.

Strategic efforts to redress inequities in the arts ecosystem through cooperation with broader efforts to address racial disparities in the region.

- Investments in predominantly Black schools and neighborhoods, as they are the primary settings for socialization and social development.
- Identification and support for key community institutions and programs that address clear inequalities in social and cultural capital.
 - This includes opportunities to network and engage with people and organizations across racial and class lines and develop communication and “soft skills” that build personal confidence and aptitude in navigating different social-racial institutions. This is not a recommendation for assimilationist policies, but one for strategic self-presentation.
- It is important to review the impact of the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation’s (VICC) voluntary school transfer program on Black creative socialization and development.

Comprehensive “cultural planning” for the region, coordinating across agencies, institutions, and businesses, and with creatives.

- Culture, which includes the arts, is the “glue” that holds a region together, connecting people through creating meaning, identification, and feelings of belonging. It is critical to understand and develop strategies to overcome decades of social, cultural, economic, and spatial divisions.

Sober reflection on grantmaking procedures.

- This includes critical reflection and revision of grantmaking practices considering findings related to unequal distribution of social and cultural capital.
- Related to the recommendation on Black entrepreneurship, it is important to reconsider the kinds of projects or supports grants can or should support.
- Educate grant reviewers about racial inequalities, the role of the nonprofit and philanthropic sector, and the role of the arts sector in the region.
 - Requires more than education on bias. There needs to be a more critical approach about the social-cultural consequences of structural-institutional inequality.

Rebrand and recuperate reputations of arts organizations in the mainstream arts ecosystem to motivate Black and non-White creatives’ engagement.

- It is important to better understand how and why certain institutions are understood as “White.”
- Invest in community engagement teams and develop long-term

community engagement strategies. The research revealed “showing up” is vital to developing trust and partnership.

Build and promote comprehensive and collaborative marketing strategy to capture the attention of the region’s diverse populations.

- Not only is the region spatially segregated, but it is also segregated in terms of social networks, virtual and in-person. Evidence suggests most creatives rely on social networks and media to build audience and customer base. However, those too are segregated and fragmented.
- It is important, therefore, to research and create inventory of media platforms and infrastructure to examine their reach and develop more effective communications strategies.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

- Time and resources limited sample size and the diversity of creative practices in the sample. As mentioned in the body, we also solicited an older cohort to get a better sense of regional arts history and potential career trajectories. With additional time and resources, the sample size of each age cohort could be expanded for increased reliability.
- While the focus on Black creatives is the study’s goal, it is important to reproduce this study with White and non-Black creatives in the region for a more accurate analysis of the role of race and ethnicity in creatives’ practices and career trajectories.

- Not enough attention was placed on queer identified creatives and their experiences. This initial project suggested a significant number of queer creatives and queer centered networks, and it hinted at their specific challenges and experiences.
- The project did not have the time or resources to conduct a comprehensive network research and analysis. We do not know which and how creatives, organizations, businesses, and governmental agencies are connected.
 - In fact, it is important to conduct an inventory of the arts ecosystem/infrastructure. What are the component parts of the ecosystem, and how do they function (or not function) as part of an ecosystem.
 - This kind of research is vital to understand the circulation of resources, including information and opportunities, as well as obstacles to their movement, and to identify sources of inequity.
- While we now have a better understanding of the experiences and subjectivities of Black creatives, we do not fully understand the cultures and practices of agencies, organizations, and businesses in the arts ecosystem. We strongly urge a detailed inventory and ethnographic study (long-term observation and participation) of the arts ecosystem.

BIAS AND POSITIONALITY

My engagement with young Black creatives is not uncomplicated. Cultural anthropologists and qualitative sociologists have long questioned the status of objective research. While this is not the appropriate space to discuss disciplinary debates, it should be understood there's general agreement that one's standpoint or positionality (social identities and statuses, e.g., age, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, class, and more) has subtle and not so subtle effects on research processes and outcomes (e.g., Haraway 1991).

For example, it would be naive to assume my age, class, professional status, and racial-ethnic identity have no impact on my engagement with Black creatives, who are generally younger, less educated, and have lower social status. Furthermore, it is not only about how I may perceive and decide to interact with them; it is also about how they see and decide to interact with me. In addition, it is important to consider how bias, conscious and unconscious, may influence any project. Bias isn't just negative prejudice. Our positionality influences how we interact with and in turn are treated by others, and our positionality shapes our biases.

I started this project after much deliberation. I questioned if I, an Asian immigrant in a predominantly Black and White city, should undertake this kind of research. A part of my question was about how I fit into the region's binary racial matrix. I'm also aware of how academics of many different stripes have benefited from

extracting knowledge from Black and other marginalized communities (Alonso et al. 2019). Considering this history, I had to be convinced I had something to contribute to Black creatives and their communities. There are plenty of reasons for Black creatives to be suspicious of my intentions. In fact, many asked about my purpose before we could get into the interview guide.

Relatedly, I deliberated whether I had done enough since my arrival in the region fifteen years ago to earn people's trust. As many of the creatives in my study observed, St. Louis is a very small, large city. Because it seems that everyone knew each other, one's reputation indeed precedes many encounters.

Because of how one's reputation is important, I proceeded with the project cautiously and promised I would do my utmost to protect the identities of those who talked with me. In this report, I refrained from employing names or pseudonyms. Moreover, I am currently considering how I can include inclusive practices in the production of future iterations of this research. This specific report, however, was written to fulfill my responsibility to the Regional Arts Commission and reciprocate their support for my work. My expectation is that the report would inform the Commission's practices and grant efforts and contribute to the region's discussions about the arts sector and prompt inclusive policies. There's still much to be thought through and discussed with the participants to be more collaborative and equitable.

REFERENCES

Alba, Richard D., John R. Logan, and Brian J. Stults. 2000. "How Segregated Are Middle-Class African Americans?" *Social Problems* 47, No. 4 543–58.

Alonso Bejarano, Carolina, Lucia López Juárez, Mirian A. Mijangos García, and Daniel M. Goldstein. 2019. *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrants and New Directions in Social Science*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Anderson, Elijah. 2000. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Anderson, Elijah. 2023. *Black in White Space: The Enduring Impact of Color in Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Austin, Algernon, and Dedrick Asante-Muhammad. 2024. "The Best Black Economy in Generations – and Why It Isn't Enough." Center for Economic and Policy Research

Benner, Chris, and Manuel Pastor. 2015. *Equity, Growth, and Community: What the Nation Can Learn From America's Metro Areas*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Carnwath, John. 2023. "Creatives Count: A Study of Creatives in St. Louis, Missouri (Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis)."

Chetty, Raj, Matthew O. Jackson, Theresa Kuchler, Johannes Stroebe, Nathaniel Hendren, Robert B. Fluegge, Sara Gong, Federico Gonzalez, Armelle Grondin, Matthew Jacob, Drew Johnston, Martin Koenen, Eduardo Laguna-Muggenburg, Florian Mudekereza, Tom Rutter, Nicolaj Thor, Wilbur Townsend, Ruby Zhang, Mike Bailey, Pablo Barberá, Monica Bhole, and Nils Wernerfelt. 2022. "Social Capital I: Measurement and Associations with Economic Mobility." *Nature* 608 (7921): 108–21.

Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, and Lawrence F. Katz. 2015. "The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence From the Moving to Opportunity Experiment." NBER Working Paper Series
https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w21156/w21156.pdf.

Cornfield, Daniel B. 2018. *Beyond the Beat: Musicians Building Community in Nashville*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Crossley, Nick. 2015. *Networks of Sound, Style and Subversion: The Punk and Post-Punk Worlds of Manchester, London, Liverpool and Sheffield, 1975–80*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Du Bois, W.E.B. 2007. *The Souls of Black Folk (1903)*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks (1952)*. New York: Grove Press.

For the Sake of All [in collaboration with] Harvey Thomas, John McAnnar, Ascend STL Inc., Community Builders Network of St. Louis, Metropolitan St. Louis Equal Housing and Opportunity Council (EHOC), and Team TIF. 2018. “Segregation in St. Louis: Dismantling the Divide.”

Ford, LesLeigh D. 2023. “Shining a Light on the Black Middle Class.” Urban Institute

Fraser, Steve. 2018. *Class Matters: The Strange Career of an American Delusion*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Frazier, Franklin. 1997 [1957]. *Black Bourgeoisie*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Freeman, Carla. 2014. *Entrepreneurial Selves: Neoliberal Respectability and the Making of a Caribbean Middle Class*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Gerson, Kathleen, and Sarah Damaske. 2020. *The Science and Art of Interviewing*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA.

Gordon, Colin E. 2008. *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Haraway, Donna. 1991. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge New York.

Jones, Robert P., Natalie Jackson, Diana Orcés, Ian Huff, and Maddie Snodgrass. 2023. *American Bubbles: Politics, Race, and Religion in Americans’ Core Friendship Networks*. Washington D.C.: PRRI.

Kochhar, Rakesh. 2024. “The State of the American Middle Class: Who is in it and Key Trends From 1970–2023.” Pew Research

Kochhar, Rakesh, and Stella Sechopoulos. 2022. “Black and Hispanic Americans, Those With Less Education Are More Likely to Fall Out of the Middle Class Each Year.” Pew Research

Lane, Carrie M. 2011. *A Company of One: Insecurity, Independence, and the New World of White-Collar Unemployment*. Ithaca: ILR Press.

Levs, Josh. 2015. *All in: How Our Work-First Culture Fails Dads, Families, and Businesses—and How We Can Fix It Together*. New York: Harper Collins.

Levs, Josh. 2017. “No, Most Black Kids Are Not Fatherless.” HuffPost

Light, Ivan, and Edna Bonacich. 1991. *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lipsitz, George. 2011. *How Racism Takes Place*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Massey, Douglas S., and Nancy A. Denton. 1998. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

McLean, Paul. 2017. *Culture in Networks*. Malden, CA: Polity Press.

Oliver, Melvin L, and Thomas M Shapiro. 2006. *Black Wealth, White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*. New York: Routledge.

Ortner, Sherry B. 2006. *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Paige, Jessica Welburn. 2022. “Examining the Loss of Wealth and Downward Mobility of African Americans.” *Rand Corporation Research Reports*

Parolin, Zachary, and Emma K. Lee. 2022. “Economic Precarity Among Single Parents in the United States During the Covid-19 Pandemic.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science* 702 (1): 206–23.

Pattillo, Mary. 2005. “Black Middle-Class Neighborhoods.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (1): 305–29.

PEW. 2015. *Parenting in America: Outlook Worries, Aspirations are Strongly Linked to Financial Situation*.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/12/17/parenting-in-america/>

Purnell, Jason, Gabriela Camberos, and Robert Fields. 2015. “For the Sake of All.” *Brown School: Health Equity Works* Washington University, St. Louis

RAC (Regional Arts Commission). 2020. Advocate, Catalyst, Partner: Rac’s Strategic Plan. <https://racstl.org/experience-the-arts/reports/>.

Ravenelle, Alexandra J. 2023. *Side Hustle Safety Net: How Vulnerable Workers Survive Precarious Times*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Spence, Lester. 2015. *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*. Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books.

Stainova, Yana. 2024. "An Ethnography of Joy: Entrepreneurship Among Latinx Communities in East Los Angeles." *American Anthropologist* 126 (4): 635–46.

Weber, Max. 2009. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism With Other Writings on the Rise of the West*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA.

Wilson, William Julius. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zaloom, Caitlin. 2021. *Indebted: How Families Make College Work At Any Cost*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.



**REGIONAL ARTS
COMMISSION**
OF ST. LOUIS

RACSTL.ORG