

**Da Book Collective**  
**By: Jovita Bell '25 & Victoria Adusei '24**  
**Rich/Collins CLIF Final Reflection 2023**

**Implementation of Da Book Collective**

Our mission is to cultivate a space for Black & non-Black people of color to gain exposure to different literary art forms by Black & Non-Black authors and artists of color and to embrace our collective differences through discussion and community service. In this way, we are able to not only bridge the gap between these two spaces but to also contribute to building accessible libraries for community members.

**Our goals:**

- Provide free and new books and supplemental material to all participants
- Engage in facilitated discussion and plan activities related to the themes of the book
- Create an environment that'll allow participants to feel open to sharing ideas, feelings, and talents in the space

**Community partner:** Celia Contelmo & Boston Public Library Grove Hall Branch

**Meeting Agenda:**

**Meeting #1 (March 18th):** Introductions, Who We Are: What Is Da Book Collective? & Identity Iceberg

- Identity workshop
  - Within this activity we wanted to start with a way to connect with our participants in a way that allowed them to think about their positions in relation to themselves as well as to us. We didn't begin with asking each other what our names were in order to diversify our approach to getting to know one another. Our participants and our volunteers worked together to answer questions about:
    - Sexuality
    - Gender
    - Religion / Spirituality
    - Race / Ethnicity/ Nationality
    - Thinking / Learning Style
    - Personality
    - Beliefs / Passions

We wanted to break these answers down more by trying to see the different ways we're connected and disconnected from these positions and how that impacts our ability to exist as people through this series of questions:

- Which identities are a source of tension for you?
- Which identities are the ones you're most proud of?
- Which identity do you think is most noticeable?
- Which identity would you like to explore more?
- What would you add to the identity iceberg (what would you add/ remove)?

We ended by asking each other our names. Within this activity our goal was to remove the barrier between us, our participants, as well as our volunteers.

**Meeting #2 (March 25th):** The Boondocks Cinema Day, 4 Corners Activity & Poetry Slam Activity

- On this day, we wanted to let our participants know a little bit more about where our book came from along with introducing another activity to work through the themes of the book. We started with an activity that worked through the different ways we assimilate in our day to day lives and how these behaviors may replicate or differ from our older generation. We then broke into groups, our participants as well as our volunteers, for our poetry slam which worked through themes surrounding racism, stereotypes, courage, as well as confidence. This activity was received pretty well by our participants and gave them a chance to further get to know our volunteers as well as us.

**Meeting #3 (April 15th):** Game Day Activity: The Boondocks Edition

- As the weather got warmer, we wanted to approach our book from a perspective that also included some level of fun. We played both twister and jenga, which incorporated different facts about our characters, the problems they have, and what they were supposed to represent.

**Meeting #4 (April 22th):** Last Meeting, Earth Day Activity: Our Earth, Your Environment? & Parting Gifts

- In our last meeting, we wanted to focus more on the things that are important to us, especially because it was Earth Day. We wanted to work through the things that we liked and didn't like within our world personally and on Earth; and the different things we could do to change the things we didn't like or add to the things we did like. Lastly, we created plant terrariums in honor of our ability to make things grow physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

**Assessing Da Book Collective Impact & Results**

Da Book Collective's audience for our Rich Collins Fellowship ranged from ages 14-17 at the Grove Hall Boston Public teen library. Part of the reason we brought our book club to this location is rooted in the fact that there was a demonstrated need for a community book program at this space. The next part involved being able to bridge the gap between Black & non-Black writers of color and Black and non-Black young people. With this in mind, we broke our meeting dates up into four parts, all of which involved working through identity in relation to ourselves, our families, our friends, and each other. The book we centered on to do this with was *The Boondocks* by Aaron McGruder comics, a book we picked based off of our assessment of the kind of books our participants liked to read. Through this book we were able to do different activities, write poetry and more in order to apply what we were reading into our day to day lives. In the end, we were able to get to know our participants quite well, leading us to our next two books for the summer: *Skin I'm In* by Sharon G. Flake and *Gumbo Ya Ya* Aurielle Marie.

### **Community Need That Da Book Collective Addressed**

We wanted our participants to gain exposure to literacy art forms from authors and artists of color. All of our books and theme related activities allowed participants to venture into a literary space that they could connect and relate to. We created a space for open discussion about embracing our heritage and community and exploring more of our identity. We utilized our space for our participants to have the opportunity to embrace their creative and artist abilities by introducing them to different art mediums. We established our partnership with the Grove Hall Branch- Boston Public Library to connect with the local community and encourage young people to go to their local public library.

### **Unexpected Successes & Obstacles**

We found communication and transportation to be the biggest challenge. Our original community partnership fell through because it was hard to stay in contact with the person we initiated and the new management. Both of us didn't have cars on campus so our main mode of communication was email. The reply time between responses was challenging to work around and without reliable transportation speaking in person was difficult to obtain. After weeks of no response, we ultimately decided to find a new community partner. The new challenge was finding a time within both of our schedules to host the program and advertising to the Dorchester community. The Grove Hall librarian worked with us closely to spread the word and gain interest before our first meeting and we were able to utilize their space for free. We worried that we were not going to get participants that would continue throughout our program but we achieved a consistent number of participants each session. Additionally, our participants showed interest in the planned activities and possibilities of continuing through the summer and next school year.

### **Current Status & Future Plans For Da Book Collective**

We are currently in the process of becoming an ICC-affiliated club on campus so we can continue our funding through marathon. We plan to establish an E-board in order to delegate tasks and gain more feedback and assistance. This summer we plan to continue meeting with our community partners and participants and plan how to continue our project in the upcoming school year. Our goal is to spread our mission across Brandeis campus and the Dorchester community and have Brandeis student volunteers at the library.

### **Brief Reflection On Da Book Collective Project**

Jovita: Growing up, access to new books was limited and the many books at school and the library were either outdated or topics I couldn't relate to. Struggling with my identity and self-worth, reading books about other black girls taught me about how valuable I am and the importance of embracing who you are. My sixth grade English teacher assisted the reading, *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon G. Flake, a book following the journey of a young school girl learning to love her dark melanin skin. In a way, this book spoke to me because during that time I was taunted for my dark skin in school and hated who I was. I finally found a story I could relate to and became fascinated to read similar books. Reading books from authors that shared the same struggles, experiences, and upbringing caught my attention and reading stories about people that look like me overcoming barriers and succeeding were motivating. I wanted to

create a space where young people can experience literature that is enriched in history and culture and showcase success from people that look like them. Our project was a success as we reached my goal to create an inclusive space for all participants and expose them to different forms of art and explore different discussion topics. It was refreshing to relax and engage in fun activities and discussions surrounding the themes of the book that are prevalent in our community, while also diving deep in conversations about identity, freedom of expression, and our experiences as minorities.

Victoria:

During my childhood, I found home and refuge within the public library in my city. Throughout my time there I was exposed to different literary genres that broadened my view and perspectives on the world. However, my only set back had to do with the fact that these were books I could not keep, making it difficult for me to read within the rigid confines of the 2-3 week loan periods. Also, purchasing books was something that was not feasible for me due to limited funds from my family as well as myself. One thing I did appreciate was that on my birthday as well as whenever she found something she wanted to give me, my grandmother would give me books. In this tradition I became interested in trying to build my own library. Along this note, another thing that drew me to this project was rooted in ensuring that people like myself were able to connect with authors who write books with them in mind. Oftentimes, when looking at English curriculums, many of the books incorporated within the classroom are not written by Black & non-Black authors of color. With this in mind, these reasons were what drew me to working with Jovita on Da Book Collective. We were interested in creating libraries in a way that is accessible, especially given our position as university students. Due to this privilege we felt it was important to create relationships with people like the Rich Collins committee in order to ensure that we are providing books for our communities.