

THE POLITICS OF NORMAL:
A CRITICAL RACE INQUIRY INTO THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF CIVIC
DISEMPOWERMENT

By

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ABSTRACT

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Research across disciplines has identified a pernicious civic empowerment gap, in which young people of color routinely participate less within and possess less knowledge about political and civic systems within the United States. The civic empowerment gap has been used to describe structural and cultural experiences within civic spaces, with particular emphasis on civic struggles within the Black community. This study explores the nature and scope of civic empowerment and civic disempowerment in the lived experiences of four Black high school pushouts in the urban Midwest. Critical Race Theory and phenomenology were employed to structure qualitative interviews intended to elicit the meaning these young people attribute to their civic positions. After situating the data within a historical and cultural context, key themes of civic boredom and civic risk are described, encompassing experiences of alienation, racial isolation, distrust, and fear. Recommendations are made for educators who seek to understand and respond to civic boredom and civic risks in the lives of marginalized students.

A to Z

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction.

Definitions of the civic have suffered from inconsistency in conceptual elaboration and operational definition. I use the term to refer to the spaces in which individuals and communities work to improve community connections and material conditions. Civic empowerment has been defined as the ability of social groups to collaboratively improve society (Sleeter, 1991). Even a cursory review of academic, popular and folk literature reveals limited avenues for Black youth's empowerment in civic spaces. When and where such avenues are available, they are marked by feelings of dissonance, despondency and disengagement (Cohen, 2011; Dawson & Bobo, 2009; Hill-Collins, 2006). Recognizing this, I began this study defining disempowerment as the cumulative effect of economic, historical, cultural and political processes that distort and constrain individuals' and groups' ability to recognize and work to improve their psychic and material wellbeing. Building on the work of Derrick Bell, I identified racism as one such disempowering process, which, as will soon be elaborated, suggests that disempowerment is a normal and engrained feature of civic life for Black subjects. A phenomenon of such normal occurrence is sometimes taken for granted, trivialized, suppressed and often, left unspoken. I now begin the project of considering the extent to which possessing this meaning enables me to, in however fragmented a fashion, access and faithfully compose the meaning of civic disempowerment in my co-researchers' testimonies. In this chapter, I present the purpose and major objectives of the dissertation. I then offer a three-part review of CRT as the theoretical framework for the study, with emphasis on the development of CRT in education, the tenets of the framework, and the appropriateness

of CRT for this investigation.

The purpose and significance of this study.

I conducted this study to describe the meaning of civic disempowerment as it occurs in lived experience of Black youth. I looked for meaning in stories of the civic sphere, one of the many spaces through which we define our relationships to one another, ourselves, our histories, and to existing and future power structures. The storytellers were Black high school *pushouts*¹, the socially constructed exemplars of deviant, willfully ignorant welfare royalty who actively refuse to give or take two fucks about you *or* your momma (Fine, 1991; Sefa Dei, Mazzuca, & McIssac, 1997; Sefa Dei, 2008; Brown & Rodriguez, 2009)! I desired to use these stories of civic disempowerment to counter social-ontological theories of Black cultural deficits. I argue that the meaning embedded in these young people's lived experiences of civic disempowerment can be used to expose and challenge dominant definitions and understandings of civic empowerment and disempowerment (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002), and serve as a basis for re-theorizing how civic empowerment is conceived and presented. This process was guided by two broad research questions:

1. What meanings do Black youth attribute to their lived experience of civic disempowerment?
2. What institutional and social processes inform the construction of these meanings?

The experience of civic disempowerment was contoured by two primary descriptive themes: *civic boredom* and *civic risk*. Civic boredom was developed into relation of two

¹ Sefa Dei (2008) develops the concept of “push-outs” to implicate “outside forces such as adverse economic conditions, realities of the social structure, and personal problems, all of which conspire to force individuals out of school (p. 264).

subthemes, *the politics of cultural affirmation* and *evaluating uncertain investments*. The broader theme of *civic risk* was also informed by two constituent subthemes: *the dimensions of civic trust* and *fatal fidelities*. The analysis of these themes offered insight into the institutional and social processes that shaped the experience of civic empowerment, including a recognizance of the structural determinants of boredom and the nature of actual and ideological risk in the civic lives of my co-researchers. I was also interested in exploring if and how lived experiences of the civic, specifically narratives of disempowerment, correspond to the tenets of critical race theory (CRT) and the philosophy of racial realism (Bell, 1992a; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006).

A review of Critical Race Theory in education.

CRT is uniquely suited for the stated objectives of this study. The purpose of this section is to review CRT within the field of education and to outline how this framework might advance discussions of civic disempowerment. Emerging in the mid-1970s, CRT was developed by legal scholars, practicing lawyers and activists seeking to explain the shortcomings of the civil rights era of the 1960s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Building on the radical and critical traditions that propelled Black, Chicano and feminist liberation struggles, CRT would be seminally defined by Derrick Bell, called “the movement’s intellectual father figure” (p. 5). Bell applied CRT as a lens for evaluating and critiquing the grounds and implications of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Based on this conclusion, he advanced the interest-convergence thesis (Bell 1995), arguing in part that racial progress is predicated not upon moral suasion, but on perceived mutual interest. His critique of *Brown* since been applied to the struggles of other groups and extended

beyond the field of legal studies, notably to the field of education.

In 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate published “Toward a critical race theory of education”. They sought to extend the race-based critique of American institutions first developed by Bell and others to the field of education by theorizing race and using it “as an analytical tool for understanding school inequity” (p. 48). In support of this objective, they submitted three propositions that justified the extension of CRT into the field of education and the rejection of multiculturalism as a means of racial progress. The first proposition advocated for the primacy of race as a social category in the analyses of oppressive conditions, building on W.E.B. DuBois’ presentation of the color line to argue that race remained “*the* central construct for understanding inequality” in the United States (p. 50, emphasis in the original). The second proposition illustrated how property rights have been and continue to be given precedence over human rights within the capitalist social order. This proposition was elaborated with specific reference to the use of property tax as the basis for funding public schools and the resulting perpetuation of school funding disparity, and the continued protection of individual intellectual property rights without regard for the systematic discrimination that limits social groups’ access to material and intellectual resources. The third proposition positioned the intersection of racism and property rights as an analytical tool for understanding inequity. Ladson-Billings & Tate supported this proposition by detailing how whiteness functions as a form of property. These functions, first elaborated by Cheryl Harris (1993), includes rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property, and the absolute right to exclude (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 53). Cumulatively, these propositions articulate a need for fundamental

restructuring of society, and for understanding education, pedagogy, practice and teacher preparation as mechanisms of the social institutions in which they operate. The authors conclude by arguing for CRT as an advancement over multiculturalist paradigms, due to multiculturalism's inability to account for and resolve competing tensions within and across social groups, or to offer an agenda for the desired societal restructuring (p. 62).

This landmark piece was followed three years later by Ladson-Billings', "Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?" Hoping to "speak to innovative theoretical ways for framing discussions about social justice and democracy and the role of education in reproducing or interrupting current practices," Ladson-Billings (1998) reviewed core features of CRT and speculated on the perceived value of a relationship between CRT and education (p. 9). She argues that CRT offers a pragmatic strategy "for social transformation" in its commitment to "unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations" (p. 11). The process of unmasking and exposing is guided by the framework's key assumptions; namely theorizing the permanence of racism, the value of experiential knowledge in revealing the "contextual contours to the seeming "objectivity" of positivist perspectives" (p. 11), and a critique of liberalism grounded in the experience of racial oppression. Ladson-Billings quotes Kimberlee Crenshaw (1995) to distinguish critical race scholarship and practice from other traditions of critical theory and thought. They collaboratively argue that CRT is unique in its desire to understand how a "regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America" (p. xiii), and the desire to "change the bond that exists between law and racial power" (p. 12). Ladson-Billings then demonstrates how the concept of law can be extended to include the

policies and procedures that govern and engage systems of education in hierarchies of racial power by illustrating how racism results in “sustained inequity” in schooling systems (p. 18). Her analysis extends to five areas: the curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding and desegregation. In contrast to perceiving the curriculum as neutral, CRT argues that curriculum is “a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” p. 18). Instructional strategies are similarly invested in sustaining these scripts, and operate from the presumption of Black cultural deficits. Deficits also inform pseudo-scientific assessment predicated on dominant conceptions of learning and evaluation. Structurally, the failure of legislators administering school funding policies to account for the correlation between material and academic advantage perpetuates race and class inequity. Ladson-Billings concludes this analysis with word of caution against the threat of cooptation of CRT, based on lessons learned through the commercialization, oversimplification, dilution and liberal reinterpretation of the cooperative learning and multiculturalist movements.

The tenets of Critical Race Theory.

Based on the political, theoretical and methodological imperatives articulated in these articles, over the next twenty-five years CRT would develop to a leading paradigm of inquiry for explorations of social identity and oppression in schooling systems. Across CRT literature, suggestions for uniform features have emerged. What follows is a synthesis of six of these features, commonly referred to as the tenets of CRT:

1. The systemic nature of racism or the permanence of racism in American society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998). The premise of CRT is that racism is an ordinary fixture

permeated in U.S. society (Bell, 1980).

2. The use of counter-storytelling or experiential knowledge in challenging hegemonic frameworks (Ladson-Billings 1998; DeCuir & Dixson 2004; Carter, 2008; Dunbar, 2008).
3. Whiteness conceived as property, and the ownership of this property equating to social control (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)
4. A critique of liberalism, specifically how legislation is viewed as “neutral or apolitical,” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Hiraldo, 2010; Decuir & Dixson, 2004).
5. Intersectionality, or, the acknowledgement of how racism intersects with other forms of oppression and subjection (Crenshaw, 1991; Ladson–Billings & Tate 1995).
6. A commitment to social justice, specifically through the “elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty” and the empowerment of subordinated minority groups. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26; Carter D. J., *Cultivating a Critical Race Consciousness for African American School Success*, 2008).

It is the first and sixth tenets that differentiate CRT from other critical theories, and distinguish the framework from post-modern scholarship more broadly. As indicated by Crenshaw (1995), these tenets seek to illuminate the nature and perpetuation of racial subordination, and challenge the ways that racial subordination manifests in institutional relationships. The endemic nature of racism and commitment to social justice tenets issue

a call for moral activism and advocacy (Headley, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Donner, 2008) specifically predicated on the ways in which the color line represents a permanent, interminable struggle for critical race scholars. “Consequently, the insomniac career of critical race theory is one without end” (Headley, 2006, p. 358). CRT also argues for a reinterpretation of racial relationships within continued struggle, an interpretation that rejects the “romantic love of integration” and promotes continued confrontation with the individuals and systems that advance racial privilege (Bell, 1992b, p. 378; Curry, Will the Real CRT Please Stand Up?: The Dangers of Philosophical Contributions to CRT, 2009). Curry argues that “CRT’s contributions lie in its ability to confront whites as whites—and nothing more—not as their potential to be better humans, not as their idealization to be more than racist, not even their intentions to be seen as individuals and not part of a colonial heritage” (p. 5). He elaborates:

In a white supremacist society, racism must be dealt with as a matter of white existence, not their pontifications about how they think about themselves amidst conditions that make their social privilege and power a certainty. The persistence of white supremacy is not some accident perpetuated by the mistaken moral codes of truly good white folks that have been led astray... The failure of [Charles] Mills framing is not in its descriptive rendering of oppression, but its normative decree—its axiomatic endorsement of an enlightened whiteness—an assertion that whiteness could *be* without this ignorance and white people could survive in a world that did not deliberately condemn all that was blessed to lack the white stain. (Curry, 2012, p. 11)

CRT insists that here is no hope of empowerment through integration, or through the

transcendence of racial categories. These features of CRT are subsumed under the philosophy of racial realism (Bell, 1992b), the content of which is further elaborated in Chapter 2. In its rejection of these mechanisms, CRT denies the legitimacy of the premises and articulated ends of the liberal framework. In this way, the framework constitutes an external critique. External critique “effects its interrogation by measuring a view’s claims and/or categories against some pre-given conceptual yardstick, i.e., against some truth criterion presupposed as valid in advance” (Gunn, 1989, p. 98).

Critical race theory and civic disempowerment.

Summarily, CRT dismisses liberalism’s colorblind thesis and demands that theoretical and empirical evidence be evaluated in light of the social and historical reality of race and racism (Bell, 1992b). For example, CRT has built upon its roots in critical legal studies to examine how supposedly neutral legal policy and practice have served to undermine Black efforts toward equal citizenship (Tate, 1997; Tyson, 2003). This line of inquiry is especially useful in relation to the objectives of the present study. Ladson-Billings (1998) discusses how the lived experiences of Black people within the sociohistorical context of the United States, specifically the lived experience of racial oppression, informs the meaning attributed to the symbols and concepts of civic life. She references Patricia Williams (1995) to articulate how lived civic experiences inform senses of civic empowerment, and how “one’s sense of empowerment defines one’s relation to law, in terms of trust-distrust, formality-informality, or right-no right (or ‘needs’)” (p. 87-88; as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 16). This proposed relationship supports both the exploration of lived experiences of the civic as one means of better understanding the material contexts in which civic identity is forged, and the assumption

that such an exploration will offer insight into the institutional and societal processes that inform meaning in these experiences. Further, CRT has been positioned as a “tool to fill in the gaps in the collective memory of civic knowledge” (Tyson, 2003, p. 20). I argue that one such gap is masked by the liberal argument that the adoption of “good” citizenship behavior is a necessary condition for civic empowerment (Levison, 2010a). Rather than accepting this argument, which personalizes civic disempowerment, critical race scholars reference marginalized knowledge and experiences to pose such questions as *What are the attributes of a “good citizen?” Who defines the criteria? Whose interests are best served by the construction of a “good citizen?”* (Howard, *The Dis(g)race of the Social Studies: The Need for Racial Dialogue in the Social Studies*, 2003). Insight to these and related questions emerged throughout the development, implementation and analysis process of this study.

Organization of the dissertation.

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe civic disempowerment as it occurs in lived experience of Black high school push-outs. In this chapter, I reviewed CRT as the framework for this exploration, and discussed how it has been used in the field of education. I afforded specific emphasis to the tenets role in articulating a philosophy of racial realism. Racial realism offers answers to Howard’s questions of authority and identity in the conceptualization of citizenship and civic life. Chapter 2 places conversations of civic disempowerment within the historical context of neoliberalism, the new colorblind racism, and the specific characteristics of the post-post-soul generation of which my co-researchers are members. In Chapter 3, I introduce critical race methodology as a qualitative methodology, and the paradigm through which

the research questions were refined and co-researchers were selected. I elaborated on the use of CRM in conjunction with critical race phenomenology, and how the commitments of CRM and CRP shaped the specific methods used to develop relationships with and gain access to the stories of my co-researchers. Chapter 4 details the data collection and analysis, and Chapter 5 contextualizes these processes by describing the research setting and providing representative biographies of my co-researchers. Chapter 6 is devoted to sharing my co-researchers' understanding of civic disempowerment, and Chapter 7 reports the two themes that I use to describe and convey the lived experience of civic disempowerment for my co-researchers. In Chapter 8, I conclude by suggesting how a civic empowerment informed by racial realism might look.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature.

This chapter reviews foundational literature for understanding civic disempowerment. I've made selections toward providing an interesting and adequate survey of ongoing conversations on civic disempowerment and related themes of civic engagement, civic achievement and civic opportunity. I don't survey the entire body of research relating to Black civic disempowerment. As a result, there are titans of Black educational and political history and theory whose work is not included here. I use this space to highlight how one significant conceptualization of civic empowerment, also purportedly derived from lived experiences of Black youth, exemplifies relevant features of liberalism. First, I discuss the philosophy of racial realism and its implications for understanding history and theory. Next, I defend the existence of civic disempowerment through a survey of relevant theoretical explorations of the nature, scope and implications of the "civic empowerment gap" (Charles, 2005; Levinson 2007, 2010; Foster-Bey, 2008). The remaining sections discuss the influence of liberalism and the new colorblind racism on the civic lives of my co-researchers, and Meira Levinson's conceptualization of civic empowerment. To conclude, I critique this conceptualization through the lens of CRT. Omitted from this section is the complex history of the struggle for African American citizenship rights. Though foundational to the present work, the empirical evidence on the existence and effects of the legislative history of Black citizenship and its ongoing influence on access to political systems is acknowledged but not reviewed.

Critical Race Theory and Racial Realism.

Explication of the critical race framework and the way it produces, manifests in

and transforms educational practice is inherently hostile, risky and uncomfortable, particularly for those with white privilege (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn, 1999; Leonardo, 2002). Functionally, CRT is an “important intellectual tool” for the “deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9).

Philosophically, CRT is a series of interconnected ontological and political assumptions that frame particular “racial realist and structural critiques of American racism” (Curry, 2009, p. 3). Racial realism is the recognizance that:

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary “peaks of progress,” short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies...This mind-set or philosophy requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status. That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair, and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph. (Bell, 1992b, p. 374)

Racial realism is the core of CRT’s external critique. The philosophy disrupts assumptions of the moral and social superiority of whiteness and claims of philosophical exceptionalism in the American historical narrative, as well as the assumption that Black liberation will stem from attainment of racial equality (Bell, 1980). In contrast to the liberal ideal of inevitable racial progress, critical race theorists believe that “racial equality is, in fact, not a realistic goal” (Bell, 1992b, p. 363). As indicated through CRT’s tenets, the philosophy of racial realism undergirds CRT’s central premise is that race and

racism are normal, integral, “permanent” and “inextricable manifestations of the American ethos” (Solorzano, 1997, p. 6; Curry, 2009, p. 4).

Racial realism is the recognizance that “the struggle for freedom is, at bottom, a manifestation of our humanity that survives and grows stronger through resistance to oppression, even if that oppression is never overcome” (Bell, 1992b, p. 379). In this study, it represents the acknowledgement of Black disempowerment in the civic sphere, and the search for strategies within the context of this disempowerment that insist upon human dignity, and demand spaces for self- and community actualization. I agree with Bell and other critical race scholars that at best, continued racial struggle will provide only brief windows of influence or peaks of progress, during which the terms of social and structural hierarchies can be disrupted or negotiated. Sustained triumph and fulfillment is unlikely to be attained, though people of color “must maintain the struggle against racism [or] else the erosion of [B]lack rights will become even worse than it is now (Bell, 1992b, p. 378). The existence of the struggle is not a point of debate – all racialized subjects struggle against or within the confines of racial domination whether they choose to acknowledge their struggle or not. It is the nature of the struggle that racial realism seeks to illuminate. At its core, racial realism is the philosophy that racial liberation is best defined by those whose have been subverted by racism. In honor of this philosophy, I use racial realism to shape and interpret the development of one contemporary manifestation of liberal thought, and how it purports to promote Black civic empowerment while perpetuating the disempowerment of Black youth.

Empirical evidence of disempowerment.

I begin with a brief review of the scope of racial civic disempowerment to offer insight into why the application of racial realism is necessary. I use research in sociology, political science and history to establish that the phenomenon of civic disempowerment exists. Civic empowerment literature is an extension of theories developed to explain and describe civic engagement, so a useful starting place for this conversation situates discussions of civic empowerment within schooling systems. Civic engagement, and ways to define and encourage it, has been a central concern of the American common school system since its conception (Rury, 2005). In tribute to this vision, civic education in America is more institutionalized than in most liberal democratic countries (Field, 1997; Hahn, 1999), and remains a fundamental component of both primary and secondary education in the United States. By intention, the American school has emerged as a primary venue through which the meaning of membership in American society is constructed. This construction includes teaching the United States Constitution as the framework for understanding de jure citizenship. But according to educational theorists interested in understanding and shaping patriotism and national identity, it also includes teaching the attitudes that the ideal citizen should possess, and the behaviors in which the ideal citizen should engage (Levinson, 2007; 2010). These attitudes include civic efficacy, patriotism, and a sense of belonging within the American civic narrative. These behaviors include compliance to systems of civic order and adherence to social expectations, like voting, paying taxes and serving on juries. Studies assessing how effectively schools encourage such dispositions and provide opportunities to develop

citizenship behaviors have referred to the end products as civic engagement or civic achievement (Levinson, 2007; 2010).

Ehrlich (2000) uses civic engagement to refer to the act of:

working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. (p. vi)

McCoy and Scully (2002) offer a similar conceptualization that emphasizes the relational aspects of civic engagement in their work, defining it as the:

meaningful connections among citizens, issues, institutions, and the political system. [Civic engagement] implies voice and agency, a feeling of power and effectiveness, with real opportunities to have a say. It implies active participation, with real opportunities to make a difference (p. 118).

Torney-Purta (2002) also stresses that civic engagement should promote change, defining the related concept of civic participation as activity devoted to improving conditions or shaping society. Across the literature, civic engagement encompasses political knowledge and skill, political dispositions and political relationships. The notion of change, or “making a difference,” isn’t consistently considered determinative criterion for civic engagement. Increasingly progressive definitions have incorporated some aspect of the relationship of civic engagement to collective wellbeing, defining the concept as the process of “taking direct action in the community on an issue of public interest common good” (Brammer & Wolter, 2008). It is also important that the definition of

civic engagement acknowledge both dominant understandings of formal and informal civic engagement, such as voting and volunteering, as well as alternative forms of civic engagement, such as civil disobedience, care work (Herd & Harrington Meyer, 2002; Netting, 2011) and militancy. With these considerations in mind, civic engagement can be considered the formal and informal means through which individuals and groups organize to orchestrate and influence distributions of power, allocations of resources, and the selection of community representatives.

Variance in civic participation has been noted across established lines of inequity, such as socioeconomic status, gender, and citizenship status. Within this broader phenomenon, however, Black youth have among the lowest rates of civic participation across all populations when assessed according to common understandings of the concept, (Charles, 2005; Levinson, 2007; Levinson, 2010b; Foster-Bey, 2008; Wilkenfeld & Torney-Purta, 2012). Disparate participation in civic life between students of color and white students has been referred to as the *civic achievement gap* or *civic engagement gap* (Charles, 2005; Levinson 2007, 2010; Foster-Bey, 2008). Civic gaps encompass differential civic engagement among older and younger citizens, technologically literate and illiterate citizens, as well as across racial and class groups (Schneider 2005). The central concern of this review is identifying proposed causes and effects of racial disparity in attainment and enactment of civic capital. The past decade has produced considerable evidence that low income and minority youth participate in civic life at lower levels than their middle class and majority counterparts (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010). “Multiple studies suggest that differences in civic achievement of US students appear to be linked to racial and socioeconomic backgrounds of students being

tested”, with poor student and students of color scoring lower than middle-class students and white students (Rubin, 2007, p. 452). Various causes for civic gaps have been postulated and defended, including poor civic knowledge base and skill set, lack of parental/adult models, disenchantment with the political system, and inadequate models for assessing the civic engagement of youth of color (Fiorina, 1999; Rubin, 2007; Ginwright, 2007). As an explanation for gaps in behavioral civic engagement, Kahne and Middaugh (2008) argue for yet another construct in discussions of civic gaps, a “civic opportunity gap”. Even in light of a general decline, youth in subordinated groups are less likely to be exposed to the forms and meanings of civic participation in school than white or wealthy peers (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Similar to findings on academic achievement gaps, Kahne and Middaugh (2008) report that:

...a student’s race and academic track, and a school’s average socioeconomic status determines the availability of the school-based civic learning opportunities that promote voting and broader forms of civic engagement. High school students attending higher SES schools, those who are college-bound, and white students get more of these opportunities than low-income students, those not heading to college, and students of color. (p.

3)

Some scholars have noted shifts in the nature and scope of Black civic engagement in light of President Obama’s candidacies and elections (Philot, Shaw, & McGowen, 1999). In contrast to the findings indicating declining civic engagement prior to Barack Obama’s Democratic Primary nomination, throughout President Obama’s campaigns and presidency to date, research has found Black youth more likely to engage in civic

activities, politically participate in online and offline settings, take part in political consumerism, talk about news, follow the news, and demonstrate overall interest in news than white peers (Harp, Bachmann, Rosas Moreno, & Loke, 2010). While identifying mechanisms that increase civic engagement among vulnerable populations remains a challenge for theorists and practitioners (Caputo, 2010), the broad consensus is that the demographics of civic engagement have changed, or at least fluctuated. But gaps in the related concepts of civic opportunity and civic empowerment remain.

Civic opportunities can be understood as accessible venues of civic engagement. Kahne and Middaugh (2008) indicate that Black and Hispanic students have reduced access to civic opportunities in comparison to white peers. They argue that “students who identified as African Americans were less likely than others to report having civically-oriented government courses, less likely to report having discussions of current events that were personally relevant, less likely to report having voice in the school or classroom, and were less likely to report opportunities for role plays or simulations” (p. 37). Similarly, after controlling for variables of income and education, whites are still more likely to volunteer and participate in community projects, as well as partake in formal and collective means of engagement (Foster-Bey, 2008). Proposed factors include “unfamiliarity with the language, lack of knowledge about dominant cultural norms, or lack of access to community volunteer and service opportunities” (p. 3). Predominantly minority and low-income schools provide fewer opportunities to participate in the civic activities that promote “readiness for citizenship and community responsibility” (Rothstein et al., 2008, p. 12). A number of scholars have documented ongoing barriers to minority and low-income youths’ preparation for civic life, one such barrier being that

they are less likely to discuss current events and political issues, have civics courses, participate in debate, and engage in simulations of political processes or events (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2007, Foster-Bey, 2008; Junn, 2004; Levinson, 2010). In contrast to arguments that civic gaps suggest a deficit in Black culture or Black values, Fox et. al.'s (2010) argue that "the existing literature on [minority] civic engagement often confuses and therefore misrepresents *lack of access* to civic engagement opportunities as *lack of motive*" (p. 623).

The distinction between lack of access and lack of motive is significant. While civic opportunity refers to access, civic empowerment has been used to refer to affective qualities such as senses of political interest and efficacy, the desire to become politically involved, and the belief that involvement will produce desired political outcomes. There are countless conceptual and colloquial representations of the term empowerment. Indeed, "empowerment has been conceptualized and defined in many different ways, depending in part on the population of interest, the area of focus, and the level of analysis" (Rappaport 1981, Zimmerman 2000 as cited in Maton & Brodsky, 2010, p. 38). Across these conceptualizations are assumptions concerning civic agency, and facilitating desires and beliefs deemed appropriate within liberal political thought. The presidential candidacy of Barack Obama prompted an increase in Black *civic engagement*. It may have even facilitated additional and more meaningful *civic opportunities* for Black youth. But it did little to affect narrative and empirical documentation of variance among civic attitudes and beliefs, namely in Black youths' dispositions toward the liberal expectations of civic life. It did little to produce sustainable changes in levels of *civic empowerment*.

While civic engagement and civic opportunity might fluctuate from election to election, “[B]lack empowerment...has broad and lasting consequences on how often, and why” Black people become involved in the political process (Bobo & Gilliam Jr., 1990, p. 387). Theorists who assume a positive correlation between civic engagement and civic empowerment might speculate that increases in civic engagement mean increases in civic empowerment as well, but it has yet to be established if an easy relationship exists between the two concepts. Together with President Obama’s election as the first African American president, increases in civic engagement have led some to postulate about a post-racial society (Dawson & Bobo, 2009; Cohen, 2011). But research suggests that race is just as if not more salient a civic concept to consider in analyses of Black political thought. Levinson (2007) reports that social trust and national pride are at exceptionally low levels for African Americans under 30. Cohen (2011) states that black youth seem “to scream out from the many statistics offered up to highlight the lived experience of marginal youth of color” (p. 200). Recognizing their disproportionate vulnerability to social crises including the recession, HIV and AIDs, childhood obesity, incarceration and unemployment, feelings of alienation, oppression and racial disempowerment persist among Black youth (Cohen, 2011). So the problem is not that Black kids don’t give a fuck – when presented with a candidate or issue they care deeply about, they tend to (Cohen, 2011). The problem is that civic gaps have been theorized in ways that obscure the function of race and racism in civic life (Dawson & Bobo, 2009).

Liberalism, Civic Disempowerment and the Politics of Blame.

Racial realism works to counter this obscuration by arguing that liberal democracy – even if its application results in the election of an African American

president – will never disrupt the material or experiential status quo for Black people. New interpretive frameworks and strategies for action must be developed in order to respond to racial civic disempowerment. One concept that shows promise in understanding the nature of civic disempowerment among Black youth is “the new colorblind racism” (Hill-Collins, 2006). In this section, I review one of the ways in which liberalism and the new colorblind racism informs the temporal horizons of my co-researchers’ lived experience. Specifically, I begin a discussion of how liberalism has sought to explain Black civic disempowerment.

Briefly presented, liberalism holds that the American populace has consented to governance by certain ideals. These ideals, such as the representative democracy and guaranteed fundamental liberties, are embodied in the United States Constitution and understood as neutral in theory. Through the broad and consistent application of the neutral ideals in the Constitution, which should summarily advance and secure individual political rights, equal citizenship is extended to and sustained for all. The potential legitimacy of the liberal position rests on a principle akin to John Rawls’ original position, or, the idea that what constitutes justice is best determined in absence of the consideration of sociopolitical or material conditions (Rawls, 1971). Liberalism rejects preferential group treatment and restorative politics in remedying structural inequity, arguing instead for the disinterested application of constitutional ideals as the basis for social justice. While often acknowledging the historical and contemporary specificity of group subjugation, the liberal position does not consider this subjugation grounds for the collective rights of those within subjugated groups. Instead, collective rights are viewed as problematic in two ways. First, they threaten to limit the individual autonomy of group

members by invalidating personal concerns that might conflict with the collective agenda. Second, they could potentially override liberties of non-members by affording special consideration, protection, or reparation to group members.

Yamamoto (1997) provides a useful review of how liberalism and attendant features of colorblind meritocracy, neutrality, individualism and objectivity work to “exclude voices on society’s margins and to perpetuate structural inequality” (p. 868). Liberalism ignores “the historical linkage of law and cultural representations to legalized racial oppression”; employs rhetoric and asserts claims “shaped initially by African American civil rights struggles...to undermine minority claims of institutional racism and sanction white claims of “reverse discrimination””; and invokes “a civil rights paradigm that understands racial conflict narrowly in white-on-black, perpetrator-and-victim terms,” while failing “to account for the unique dimensions of interracial group grievances and to facilitate possibilities for intergroup healing” (p. 828). Within the liberal framework, Black people as a social group are disjunctively represented as an aggregate of Black individuals, so that institutional racism can be misrepresented as a series of individual claims of mistreatment. Since “individual action is thought to be at the source of racism as a social practice” (McClendon, 2005, p. 286), a cumulative affect of this philosophical shortcoming is the increasing and intensifying dissociation of liberal conceptions of justice from racial justice as experienced and conceived by racialized groups (Yamamoto, 1997). Curry (2007) cites David Carroll Cochran to argue that “because of its excessive individualism, liberalism fails to understand race and “the profound importance of culture, of membership in cultural groups, and of the influence these factors have within the institutions, practices and meanings of American society””

(Cochran, 1999, p. 5 as cited in Curry, 2007, p. 43). As a result of this failure, liberalism ignores or distorts the cultural and “material conditions that sustain racism” (McClendon, 2005, p. 287). Liberal justice and (to the extent that it is a feature of justice) liberal empowerment are believed to stem from “a normative universalism” achieved through the “elimination of racial distinctions” (Curry, 2007, p. 43).

Just as liberalism supposes the individual actions of dominant group members to be the source of racism as a social practice, it assumes the individual actions and attributes of subordinate group members to be the source of disengagement and disempowerment. The primacy of the individual argument has been used to challenge the character and cultural values of Black people, and undermines our ability to discuss how groups have been denied access to civic empowerment. I discussed above how not giving a fuck as a response to liberalism has been interpreted outside of appropriate racial-historical schemas. Cloaked in deficit theories that personalize the affective consequences of disenfranchisement, the assumed stance of not giving a fuck is translated as malignant ignorance of or callous disregard for liberal democratic ideals when perceived in the dispositions of Black people in the civic sphere. I’ve found this assumption to be a constituting variable in negative assessments of Black people’s civic behavior, representative of the “negative, stereotypic and counterproductive views” about race, culture, moral worth and intelligence that rationalize lowered expectations, eliminated social welfare programs, and campaigns of system justification and victim blame (Ford & Grantham, 2003, p. 217). Deficit theories are exemplified in Dinesh D’Souza’s (1995) analysis of the relationship between continued racism, poverty and the presumed lack of Black civic responsibility:

Nothing strengthens racism in this country more than the behavior of the African-American underclass which flagrantly violates and scandalizes basic codes of responsibility and civility ... if blacks as a group can show that they are capable of performing competitively in schools and the workforce, and exercising both the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship, then racism will be deprived of its foundation in experience. (p. 268)

D'Souza argues that Black people's lack of access to the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship, as well as the continued presence of individual racism in American life, is primarily the consequence of the behavior of African American people. Indeed, a characteristic feature of conservative and liberal paradigms is the presentation of civic agency as a matter of individual will, so that the only meaningful obstacle to effective citizenship is "the lack of principled self-help and moral responsibility" within the civic actor (Giroux H. A., 2003, p. 194). Instead of accounting for the various ways in which social groups have been excluded from full psychic and political participation, deficit thinking as a feature of liberal thought argues that people of color, and the critique of liberal models of citizenship derived from experiences of oppression, "are relatively insignificant to the growth and development of our democracy and our nation and they represent a drain on the resources and values" (Ladon-Billings, 2003, p. 4). This line of reasoning is used to justify disparities in participation in civic empowerment.

Rather than arguing that this disparity is somehow the result of Black moral or cultural failures, a more nuanced response to the empirical reality of racial civic disparities is that centuries of systematic exclusion and suppression of Black civic life has depressed aspects of the community's political imagination. Cornel West (2001) speaks

to such a depression when he identifies the phenomenological dimensions of Black nihilism:

Nihilism [within the Black existential experience] is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. (p. 23)

Referring to Black nihilism as “a disease of the soul” (p. 29), West points to the inhumaneness of capitalism and white supremacy as culprits in the weakening of Black people’s collective psychic immune system. An additional exacerbating factor is the “relative inattention to the crisis of Black youth” by Black leaders, a crisis that West places within the decade predating the second edition of Race Matters, published in 2001 (West, 2001, p. xviii). The timeline of West’s proscribed crisis is supported by empirical data on Black youth’s civic participation. After controlling for socioeconomic status, Black people had higher rates of civic participation than white counterparts throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Shingles, 1981; Bobo & Gilliam Jr., 1990). That trend had inverted by the 1990s, prompting interdisciplinary efforts to identify the nature and scope of this inversion (Charles, 2005; Levinson, 2010b; 2007; Foster-Bey, 2008). Offering insight into structural and institutional barriers to Black civic participation, these efforts further problematized previous arguments that Black civic behavior is dictated by low self-esteem or subcultural norms and value systems (Danigelis, 1977; Ellison & London, 1992). Critical research theorizing Black historical and generational consciousness and relations also indicates that this trend results from something more complex than a spontaneous, collective act of no longer giving a fuck about politics.

This generation encounters the effects of “concrete, historically specific outworkings of millennial capitalism and the culture of neoliberalism” manifested in mass-mediated alienation, individualism and privatization (p. 334). The new colorblind racism works to obscure these processes. Hill-Collins (2006) defines this new colorblind racism as one in which white people can:

... celebrate racial and ethnic mixtures of all sorts [and] develop positive feelings about the music and dance styles of impoverished Black American youth.

Privatization masks these relations. By making the marketplace the final arbiter of all social relations, the segregation and racial hierarchy that does remain can be attribute to the good and bad qualities of people who compete in the marketplace. (p. 7)

Indeed, the increased representation and acceptance of symbols derived from Black culture within the capitalist market has allowed politicians and the public to assume that Black people have been adequately represented and accepted as well. Giroux (2003) argues that “marketplace ideologies now work to erase the social from the language of public life so as to reduce all racial problems to private issues such as individual character (p. 193).

In contrast to previous forms of racism, wherein structural forms of racism were overt and codified in law, colorblind racism operates to eliminate the public recognition of race as a constitutive factor in contemporary oppression (McClendon, 2005).

McClendon (2005) argues further that

the color-blind thesis is often used as the justification on the part of both conservatives and liberals to deny the need for race-based solutions to the

persistence of racism. For the former (as well as the latter) the process of transcending race (as a social category) is equated with eradicating racism. Given that attitudinal and belief forms of racism require conscious acknowledgement of race and racial categories and in turn institutional racism does not, it follows then that the elimination of public recognition of race as a social category fails to uproot the institutional racism. In effect, we have an ostrich head approach to racism. (p. 286)

As a result, the condition of the Black community is presumed to be the exclusive result of the actions of Black people, a conclusion that rationalizes the demonization and disposability of Black bodies in unprecedented ways (Kitwana, 2002; Giroux H. A., 2003; 2006; Boyd, 2004). My co-researchers are not members of the postindustrial-soul or millennial generation. Still, they have uniquely suffered from processes of Othering, distortion, and negation, the burden of a new colorblind racism, and the rhetoric of a “post-racial Obama era” (Lum, 2009). With the experiential and empirical data available on youth born throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, the effects of liberalism on the civic lives and structures of my co-researchers can still be elaborated.

A Liberal Conception of Civic Empowerment.

A recent definition of civic empowerment developed in relation to Black youth can be found in the work of Meira Levinson (2007; 2010a; 2010b). While Wilkenfeld and Torney-Purta’s (2012) summarize Levinson’s presentation of civic empowerment as the possession of civic knowledge, engagement, and agency, Levinson develops the concept at length throughout a book and across several articles and book chapters on the theme. Levinson (2009) suggests that students who are empowered are capable of working “in

concert to decide the direction of the nation and shape history” (p. 28); “inspired to...use their own personal stories to direct others’ attention to issues” (p. 35); and aware of strategies of “collective action as an essential lever of power in civic life” (p. 38). Empowered students are able to “construct empowering civic narratives that simultaneously cohere with their lived experiences and impel them to civic and political action” (Levinson, 2005, p. 7).

Levinson argues that this type of empowerment requires “an enormous shift in the social studies curriculum delivery model,” especially delivery models in urban schools (p. 7). This shift includes the restoration of the civic education to the curriculum, the development of a constructivist curriculum, the incorporation of experiential education, and the teaching of explicit strategies for empowerment (Levinson, 2005). She suggests that these curricular reforms, together with the qualities of “good” citizenship, will advance civic empowerment in Black communities. According to Levinson, civic empowerment is something that a good citizen possesses. She defines the characteristics of good citizenship at length:

Good citizens need to be *knowledgeable* about politics, history, government, and current events; they need to be *skilled* communicators, thinkers, deliberators, and actors; they need to be *concerned* about the common good in addition to their own self- interest, and to *believe* it is possible and worth trying to make a difference through public action; and they need to *become involved* in public or community affairs, through some combination of voting, protesting, contacting public officials, mobilizing others, contributing time or money to causes or campaigns,

participating in community groups, and other appropriate actions (Levinson, 2009, p. 5).

Though Levinson admits potential problems of hegemony and inadequacy with articulating an agenda for the good citizen, she sets one nonetheless. The reader is left to wonder if and how her notions of the “common good” and “appropriate action” derive from coercive standards of liberal moral conduct. If this is the new normative framework, what does it mean for Black youth to be normal? This leads the conversation back to questions of power, privilege and conceptions of citizenship raised through the CRT framework: *What are the attributes of a “good citizen?” Who defines the criteria? Whose interests are best served by the construction of a “good citizen?”* (Howard, The Dis(g)race of the Social Studies: The Need for Racial Dialogue in the Social Studies, 2003). Answers to the former questions are evident: Levinson lists the attributes and defines the criteria for good citizenship. The latter question is best answered through reflection on four additional questions raised in relation to Levinson’s presentation for civic empowerment.

First, *is it possible for Black youth to meaningfully participate in deciding the direction of the nation?* CRT argues no. Roberts (1997) argues that white Americans broadly view racial reforms as “contrary to their self-interest because they perceive black people's social position to be in opposition to their own. Under American racist ideology, constitutional interpretations that would benefit blacks are antithetical to whites’ interests because blacks’ social advancement diminishes white superiority” (p. 1765). Continued systems of racial disenfranchisement in the civic sphere suppress avenues for “meaningful participation and social change” (Chang, 1993, p. 1303). Second, *is it*

reasonable or just to require that Black youth to use their own personal stories to direct others' attentions to issues? Again, CRT argues no. Racial realism does not morally bind people of color to the project of white people's "anti-racist re-socialization" (Curry, Will the Real CRT Please Stand Up?: The Dangers of Philosophical Contributions to CRT, 2009, p. 3). To borrow the language of Black womanist Hazel Carby (1992), our bodies are no longer the source through which middle-class white people "cleanse their souls and rid themselves of guilt" (p. 11). Further, presenting civic struggle as a moral obligation, whether as a duty to one's ancestors or to one's government, appropriates blame to the disenfranchised rather than to the structures that alienate them. Third, *has collective action proven to be an essential lever of power in civic life?* Another no. CRT scholars have noted "how very little actual social change" took place in response to the collective action that defined the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century, with specific reference to the "continuity of institutional authority," the "de facto segregation of schools, work places and neighborhoods," and discourses of colorblindness (Crenshaw, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. xvi).

Last, does this presentation offer the potential for true civic empowerment?

Levinson admits that her attempt to construct a counter narrative to the "moderate triumphalist" interpretation of American history is "in certain ways a mirror inversion of the traditional progressivist perfectibility narrative" (Levinson, 2010b, p. 19). This is likely due to the fact that her desired end – a gradualist participatory democracy - mirrors that of the interpretations she critiques. Her theorizing is thus confined to the boundaries of the dominant narrative. Further, because Levinson confuses racism with the structures

of slavery and segregation, the elimination of these structures through integration is the only evidence she needs to argue for civic empowerment. Bell (1992) responds that:

...it is time we concede that a commitment to racial equality merely perpetuates our disempowerment. Rather, we need a mechanism to make life bearable in a society where blacks are a permanent, subordinate class. Our empowerment lies in recognizing that Racial Realism may open the gateway to attaining a more meaningful status. (p. 377).

Within CRT, there is no civic empowerment without racial realism.

Levinson's argument is dangerous because it suggests that if Black youth could just find themselves in the broader civic narrative, they'd be ennobled and inspired to struggle for the promises of American liberalism and the illusory hope of racial equality (Curry, 2007). Lucius Outlaw refers to defining the methods and outcomes of the Black freedom struggle through the lens of liberalism as "liberal confinement," arguing that "throughout the history of the presence of African people in this country, the dominant theoretical framework out of which we have struggled has been provided by the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights" (Outlaw, 1983, p. 72). This framework has proven inadequate, and like Bell, Outlaw insists on a conceptualization of liberation grounded "in the concrete needs and aspirations of African Americans" (Outlaw, 1983, p. 66). Racial realism holds the potential to provide such grounds. Further, Levinson's argument does not acknowledge that even if racial equality were a potential outcome of civic struggle that occurs within liberal confinement, it could only come at the cost of a self-determined racial identity in the name of normative universalism. Black people as individuals will be asked to make

claims to justice and for empowerment without reference to their particular historical oppressions, material conditions and social context.

McClendon (2005) contends that “the instantiation of the universal mandates the concrete particular as a logical necessity,” and this relationships grounds the universal humanity of Black people in the particularity of their Blackness. He concludes that “to deny my Blackness is to deny my humanity and not as the color-blind presupposition olds – as a measure to affirm my humanity” (p 287). Racial realism holds that Blackness will never function as an appropriate or acceptable civic identity because whiteness is the presumed marker of universality within the civic sphere (Bell, 1992b; McClendon, 2005; Curry, 2012). In alignment with the philosophy of racial realism and conceptualization of the new colorblind racism, Clarke (1989) argues,

Although artifacts of the black American life would have been abstracted and integrated into the American consumer culture, flesh and blood black Americans remain (with important and problematic exceptions) on the periphery of the American society. (p. 9)

The discourse of civic empowerment and disempowerment within this specific historical and ideological context is also rife with deficit thinking as an interpretive framework for developing solutions to civic empowerment gaps. One consequence of deficit thinking in the civic realm is the characterization of civic disempowerment as a matter of consciousness, rather than as a consequence of material conditions. Or, the focus in conversations of civic empowerment and disempowerment has shifted from structural barriers to civic participation to an assessment of Black students’ attitudes, inspirations, beliefs, moral initiative and understandings. Articulated in reference to

West's understanding of Black nihilism, conceptualizing civic empowerment as the result of personal or collective interest and investment rather than the result of systematic obstacles to participation ignores the "weighty forces of racism, patriarchy, economic inequality, homophobia, and ecological abuse" that hang on the neck of the Black community in new and more asphyxiating ways, and serve as the expanse of the experiential universe for Black youth throughout the country (p. 109). I argue that in order to respond to this weight, more work must be done to understand it. Redefining civic empowerment to encompass its structural determinants, rather than isolating the construct from its material and institutional base, will prove useful toward countering social-ontological theories of Black cultural deficits.

CHAPTER THREE

Toward a Critical Race Phenomenology.

Though Chapters 1 and 2 are demonstrative of my specific interpretation of CRT, this chapter further recounts how I understand my methodological commitment to talking the talk and walking the walk (Hylton, Talk the talk, walk the walk: defining Critical Race Theory in research, 2012) and offers insight into my performance of CRiT walking within phenomenology (Hughes & Giles, 2011). Or, when Tommy Curry (2009) asks *Will the real CRT please stand up?*, this is what I offer in response. I begin with a review of qualitative methodology and critical race methodology (CRM). I then introduce cultural intuition as a distinctive feature of CRM, and make explicit the role of cultural intuition in the practice of critical race phenomenology (Gordon, 1999; Fanon, 2004; 2008; Yancy, 2008a; 2008b). This chapter concludes with a discussion of establishing relationships of trust within the phenomenological research process.

Qualitative methodology and critical race methodology.

Qualitative methodology attempts to make sense of phenomena and the meanings that people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, 2). It provides an effective means of interrogating the complex interactions that occur between people and within society that cannot be captured through generic instruments. In contrast to concerns of generalizability, qualitative methodology produces rich description and contextualization of social phenomena that serve to advance research through transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Though the research is conducted in a specific context, the strategies that human beings use to interpret and negotiate their social environments may be similar across like conditions. Further, qualitative methodology imposes certain expectations

concerning the role of the researcher. It demands disclosure of guiding principles, motivations and commitments on the part the researcher. Second, it privileges familiarity with context, or “insider” accounts of diverse lived experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Staples, 2012, p. 59), in the interpretation and elaboration of culturally sensitive data. Employing qualitative methods will allow the cultivation of insight into the meaning Black youth attribute to civic disempowerment, as well as help to delineate the wider sociopolitical context in which civic life takes place.

Qualitative methodology is an umbrella term that encompasses a broad spectrum of research methodologies. Within that spectrum is critical race methodology, a form of data collection and analysis that applies the tenets of CRT to the procedures of investigation.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define CRM as:

A theoretically grounded approach to research that (a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process. However it also challenges the separate discourses on race, gender, and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of students of color; (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of color; (c) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender and class subordination; and (d) focuses on the racialized, gendered and classed experiences of students of color. (p. 24)

The primary method of CRM as advanced by Solórzano and Yosso is counter-storytelling. As indicated, counter-storytelling serves as a tenet of CRT, the act of privileging the experiences of Black people to challenge dominant interpretations that

would silence or distort those experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Carter, 2008; Dunbar, 2008). An outgrowth of standpoint theory, counter-storytelling holds that the marginalized hold a unique “perspective on intersecting oppressions” (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 27). In addition to helping disenfranchised people “make sense of the world we live in” (Dunbar, 2008, p. 94), Solórzano and Yosso reference Delgado (1995) to define counter-story as a “tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (p. 31). After positioning the counter-story as a tool, they build upon the work of Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Bernal (1998) to operationalize the counter-story. As a method, a researcher employs “theoretical sensitivity”, or awareness and insight to the context, nature and relevance of data; and “cultural intuition”, defined as insight into collective experience and community memory, to collect and interpret their own stories, the stories of others, or stories derived from a “legacy of struggle” to generate distinctive accounts of social relationships (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 27; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 34). Counter-stories are gathered from primary sources, existing literature, and professional and personal experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 35).

My goal was to share the counter-stories of my co-researchers in the most accurate and authentic way possible. Central to the process of collecting and composing counter-stories is the process of cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Referencing the necessarily subjective nature of critical and naturalistic inquiry, cultural intuition refers to the personal and cultural qualities possessed by a researcher that shape her ability to interpret and share the data (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

The content of cultural intuition is derived from personal and professional experience, immersion in relevant theory and literature, and the analytical research process itself (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In CRM, personal experience refers to contextual understandings gained from collective experience, historical memory, ancestral wisdom, and similar concepts that suggest how people in particular social locations encountering similar historical, cultural or material phenomenon are uniquely empathetic to or familiar with certain experiences. It honors theoretical and experiential insights developed “from being and living” in contexts and conditions similar to those of the research participants as a source to illuminate phenomena in new ways (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In practice, cultural intuition is one way in which we make informed decisions about the type and meaning of the data we collect. In addition to the cultural intuition of the researcher, the cultural intuition of the co-researchers is also honored and foregrounded by actively engaging participants in the data analysis (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Dunbar, 2008). Cultural intuition places the data gathered from the research process in constant dialog with the data, the theoretical framework, the sociohistorical context, and personal and philosophical commitments. Validity is assumed when there is mutual affirmation across these sources of information.

CRT and the phenomenological method.

To collect counter-stories, I used cultural intuition as a guideline for employing the phenomenological method. Specifically, I used personal and professional experience, immersion in relevant theory and literature, and the analytical research process to make sense of phenomenology as a method for this study. In this section, I suggest that culture intuition and phenomenology together meet the criteria of a critical race phenomenology

(Gordon, 1999; Fanon, 2004; 2008; Yancy, 2008a; 2008b). While this is not CRM, it remains a methodological derivative of CRT, as the politics of the inquiry are “traceable back through methodologies to the ideas that underpin them” (Hylton, *Talk the talk, walk the walk: defining Critical Race Theory in research*, 2012, p. 26). Phenomenology is the act of uncovering and describing the structures of lived experience (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). It privileges the appeal to the life-world in seeking to describe the core essence of what it means to experience a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenologist is concerned with describing that which appears or emerges through stories of direct personal experience, and the invariant meanings attributed to these experiences. The desired outcome is an “understanding of meaningful concrete relations implicit in the original description of experience in the context of a particular situation” (p. 14). Instead of focusing on how collective subjects take and use information to navigate the conditions of their social world, phenomenology aims to reveal the ways that the social world is constituted through subjective experience. The focus of phenomenology, then, “is exclusively and continually aimed at understanding human experience” (p. 19) without imposing evaluative criteria, formulating causal explanations, or drawing interpretative generalizations.

Within phenomenology, all externally developed categories such as race, racism and racial positions, are considered secondary to any experiential categories that may emerge. I fell hard and fast for the narrative potential of phenomenology, but I struggled with the framework’s erroneous approach to interpreting racialization and colonialism. In its emphasis on stories of lived experience, phenomenology corresponds to personal and philosophical and spiritual convictions concerning the spiritual significance of spoken

word, and the importance of naming aspects of one's experience. However, stories are just a ritualized form of talk, and talk is cheap if the storyteller is unwilling to "take a stance on behalf of human liberation" (Ladson-Billings & Donner, 2008, p. 63). In response, I chose to adopt the methodology of phenomenology as one way of investigating the human condition, while rejecting the ontological assumptions that reduce the transformative potential of the phenomenological story to a series postmodern musings about how we're all essentially the same. This rejection included claims about the nature of reality, the nature of consciousness, relationships between the knower and the object of study, and what it means to 'be' in the world. Instead, I deploy the phenomenological method through the epistemological and ontological framework of CRT. I hope to do so, critically and knowledgeably, within the present study with recognizance of the insight that the phenomenological method provides within the social structures that CRT articulates. I argue that CRM can be employed with the phenomenological method yet remain committed to the "racial realist and structural critiques of American racism inherent" to CRT (Curry, 2009, p. 3), and prove appropriate for my objective of evoking the total reality of how civic life is experienced for my co-researchers.

When applying the phenomenological method alone, there is an acceptance that the lived experiences of the co-researchers might not validate the theoretical and conceptual boundaries of a predetermined framework. A story authenticating internalized oppression or articulating racial transcendence would thus be legitimated because dominant phenomenological tradition lacks external reference to racism or resistance. Instead, CRT questions how racism emerges in narratives of lived experience as a

universal and/or invisible structure, and works to explain its appearance. In its insistence on the endemic nature of racism, CRT holds that in order to truly illuminate the “structures that [govern] the instances of particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon” (van Manen, 1997, p. 11), we must account for racism, attendant unobservable processes, and manifested effects. In CRM, stories told by people of color that challenge or reject the project of social transformation are considered examples of “minority majoritarian storytelling” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28). Minority majoritarian storytelling occurs when a story told from the perspective of a subordinated interest seems to validate “the bundle of presuppositions, perceived wisdoms, and shared cultural understandings” that people in dominant positions bring to discourses of racial, gender, class or other forms of privilege (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993, p. 462). One explanation for the existence of minority majoritarian storytelling is found in Frantz Fanon’s (2008) argument that the articulation of the lived experiences of racialized subjects is inextricable from monovocals of white privilege². Specifically, he detailed how “the lived experience of the Black” is accompanied by certain psychic and physical restrictions that would lend to narratives of *self-distortion*, constraining the validity of phenomenological investigations in the colonial and post-colonial context (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2008, p. 89). As Jeremy Weate (2001) elaborates,

In the interracial encounter, the White is able to participate in the schematization of the world, whilst the Black may not, for his skin difference closes down the possibility of free agency. A white *mythos* inserts itself between the black body and its self-image, becoming the ‘elements used’ in a reflexive understanding of black subjectivity. In contesting the terms of Merleau-Ponty’s account of bodily I

modify Weate's argument to suggest that due to the *endemic* role of racism in determining social outcomes, neither white nor Black subjects freely participate in the schematization of the world. The discourse of white privilege restricts the agency of all subjects, albeit in very different ways. As such, phenomenological approaches to Blackness, whiteness (Bergo, 2005; Ahmed, 2007) and race more broadly are both possible and necessary to disrupt these social categories as "ontological givens" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 150). Cultural intuition, the cumulative knowledge developed through experience, engagement with theory, and systematic social justice inquiry, allows the researcher to remain reflexive and critical throughout these disruptions.

Toward a critical race phenomenology.

The work of Fanon, Lewis Gordon (1999) and others rely upon race as a primary perceptual category in exploring the meanings that emerge from the lived experience of the colonizing and colonized subject. This does not argue for a Black phenomenology, but a phenomenology equipped to engage the Black experience and condition. To borrow a distinction from John H. McClendon, this suggests a phenomenology motivated by, rather than oriented toward race, wherein the meaning of Blackness is not a given but remains "a matter of discovery" (McClendon, 2005, p. 283). Referencing these traditions, I refer to the methodological framework of this study as critical race phenomenology (CRP). CRP recognizes how race is systematically expressed and ingrained within social and civic relationships, how it mediates our perceptual categorizing and alters the social and cognitive mechanisms that allow sense making and storytelling to take place. While we don't always "see" race as a politically, historically and "culturally meaningful

signifier” (Bergo, 2005, p. 136), we do see its unifying tendencies. CRP works to identify these tendencies, or, to complete “the nature and meaning of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). If phenomenology is an investigation of the nature of experience itself, CRM and phenomenology together investigate the nature of the racial experience, a particular kind of investigation of particular relationships in the world.

Cultural intuition enhances these investigations. Within the colonial and immediate post-colonial context, “the experiences of racism continually create a tension and dissonance. There is a dehumanizing of the subject and the subsequent struggle of the subject to reclaim her or his humanity” (Sefa Dei, 2010, p. 18). Those with cultural intuition rooted in the subjective knowledge of race and historical oppression are “woefully” prepared for the actual/lived engagement of racism (Sefa Dei, 2010, p. 18). Cultural intuition, with its emphasis on insights derived from social position, bears the potential for unique attunement to the dehumanizing experience of otherness, and the ways in which certain racial and historical scripts are imposed on social actors. Because of this, I argue that cultural intuition allows researchers and co-researchers to undergo Fanon’s process of “disalienation”, or refusing to accept the reality in which white privilege is natural as definitive (Fanon, 2008, p. 201). Within CRP, cultural intuition offers insight into how the “transformation of the present requires something like a critical resistance to the dominating episteme - an active denial of the mythos that intervenes in the formation of body-images” (Weate, 2001, p. 187). Embracing cultural intuition is the first step toward this denial, a first step toward countering of stories of domination. This embrace greatly informed the data collection and analysis.

Learning to trust.

There is no universally accepted approach to the practice of cultural intuition or phenomenology. Because of this, I will be careful to identify when and how my personal experiences or theoretical lenses within and related to CRT informed the collection and analysis of the data. As noted, my understanding of and ongoing participation within modes of expression within the Black community heavily shaped the structure of the phenomenological interviews. I know you can't run from what you come from, but I worried about establishing credibility with my co-researchers. I knew all too well how fatal the arrogance developed within the ivory tower could prove in a research setting. When I was nineteen, I participated in a study on the breastfeeding knowledge of Black women. I had just weaned my oldest daughter, after breastfeeding for almost two years. The white female researcher, however, had predetermined my ignorance. She would begin to say "lactation" and hesitate, replacing it with "when your body makes milk". Torn between expressing my frustration and performing the illiterate welfare mother, I opted for the latter, which proved the shortest distance to the \$20 Kroger gift card incentive. My answers were brief and blissfully uninformed. I thought bad research karma had finally caught up with me when I initially encountered resistance from my co-researchers in discussing civic disempowerment. But I'd been well equipped for the experience, and I knew that any success I might experience "predicated on my capacity to understand and to convey that I, too, had similar lived experiences" (Dunbar, 2008, p. 89). As Dr. Dunbar had cautioned, they were extremely suspicious of my sudden presence and interest in their lives. They adopted the "appropriate cultural stance" of requisite skepticism to an authority figure asking too many questions (Dunbar, 2008, p.

89). Working through this “atmosphere of distrust” was difficult (Achebe, 2002, p. 13), but we managed as I was able to prove I was not law enforcement, a social worker, or otherwise a direct representative of coercive institutional power. Once we established a measure of trust (which happened at a different point for each co-researcher), I was able to establish a conversational relation through which Nick felt “comfortable enough to come and just, you know, just chill.”

This section discusses trust, and how my co-researchers and I came to develop it. While I offer no formal theoretical connections between personal trust and civic trust, I feel that these moments offer insight into who my co-researchers are and what they value. I believe that my co-researchers are disempowered, and as stated, I correlate the politics of not giving a fuck to disempowerment. Since not giving a fuck encompasses performances of apathy, expediency, and indifference, I anticipated a certain amount of bullshit to emerge in the data (I hope the breastfeeding researcher anticipated this, as well). To bullshit is not to lie, it’s been defined as running your mouth without regard for the truth, to talk nonsense or nothingness, or to speak without substance or content (Smitherman, 2000; Frankfurt, 2005). Levin and Zickar (2002) build on Frankfurt’s exemplar presentation of the concept that bullshit happens when expediency is the primary criterion “for making representations, [with disregard] for either truth or falsehood” (p. 253). In conducting a study on the civic among the civically disempowered, I am somewhat complicit in advancing one of the factors that Frankfurt correlates to the promulgation of bullshit: “the widespread conviction that it is the responsibility of a citizen in a democracy to have opinions about everything, or at least everything that pertains to the conduct of his country’s affairs” (p. 63).

There were unavoidable moments when my questions probably sounded a lot like: *Tell me a story about something you might not care about. Tell me about something that may confuse you or make you feel stupid. Tell me something that seems wholly irrelevant to your existence and interests.* So I honor the reality that, at least in our first conversations, I was essentially begging Christine, Neveah, Nick and Kevin to bullshit me. Conversations on trust in qualitative research are expansive and ongoing. Concepts such as research site immersion, insider research, rapport, empathy, transparency and commitment are usually invoked. All of this can be subsumed under Jacobsen's (2010) approach to recognizing and responding to bullshit – taking my co-researchers seriously, living in reciprocal relationships with them, and the practice of “deep” listening (p. 446). Similar recommendations can be derived from Yancy's (2008a) critique of a particularly virulent response to his presentation on the lived experience of Blackness and maleness. I should not position myself as a “discerner of bullshit” (p. 227), instead, I should work to create a dialogical space of philosophical vulnerability by suspending any sense of self-certainty, reflecting on my own narcissism, and recognizing my role in hegemonic systems. Ultimately, the goal was not to identify every instance of bullshit within or eliminate bullshit from the research process. My goal was to develop a relationship with my co-researchers wherein we didn't desire to bullshit one another. I share some of the moments in which they challenged my character, my motives, and the overall significance of my research because they offer some insight into how this was accomplished.

Stories of trust: A research note.

When asked to tell a story about trust, Dawanna shared an instance when she

loaned her close friend Marcus her last \$20. She expressed her confidence not only that he would repay her, but also that he would provide her with financial assistance if she ever needed it. Mike told about a time that, based on his mother's warning, he cancelled plans to attend a party. His faith in his mother's word only grew when there was in fact a shooting during that party. Nurse trusted the counsel and experience of her mother as well. Her mother had no high school degree, yet earned a gainful employment as a legal aide while all of Nurse's aunts subsisted on welfare and her grandmother's Social Security. Andy's example of trust was his girlfriend, whom he steadfastly believed would care for their son, remain faithful to him (even if he strayed), and not "spend up" his money. As expected, trust included elements of predictability, reciprocity and established credibility. Also contributing to understandings of trust was how relationships between individuals, particularly Black individuals, were defined in a given space. For example, one of the first goals of all four co-researchers seemed to be determining my membership status within and allegiances to their community. In other words, they needed to know who I was as a Black woman before deciding if I were trustworthy. The following exchanges occurred during my first interview with each co-researcher. Collaboratively, they help to develop a story about racial identity and trust.

Nurse expressed interest in my schooling experiences throughout all of our conversations. The first time we met, however, she tested her assumption that success for Black women required certain cultural compromises. She was interested to learn which of these compromises I might have made, and how I felt about these compromises in light of my present accomplishments:

Nurse: So how you know that...how do you know that when you look back over

everything, that what you had to give up was worth it? You know what I'm saying? Like I had this job at [a local conference center] and everyday wearing the same thing and smiling at people when they was rude to you and the white girls get the better hours and better parties. And basically it was just not even worth it, to pimp myself like that every night and for nothing. And people say oh look at Oprah or look at what's her name, she was with George Bush?

Researcher: Condoleezza Rice?

Nurse: Yeah, her. Her and Oprah and even Tyra Banks. You need white people to like you or to hire you or whatever and you talk different, or you get the plastic surgery on your face. What are you after that? Do you do, do you go through that?

Nurse conceived that my professional position put me at risk of selling out. She made it clear that she felt we inhabited the same precarious space in which our cultural identity might be subordinated to the expectations of a market controlled by dominant cultural and aesthetic norms. She then articulated the correct response to this form of cultural imperialism: don't pimp yourself. In this conversation, as she asked me about my experiences, Nurse signified that certain choices were akin to prostitution. To reassure her, I told her I volunteered in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and that I could recite almost any post-Bobby Whitney Houston song by heart. Andy was a bit more direct in raising concerns about my cultural identity and related personal commitments:

Andy: Ms. Inez said this is an important opportunity to talk to somebody who wants to see things happen. But I mean, this is no offense, but who's ear you got? I mean, who is you?

Researcher: In what way, Andy? What do you want to know about me?

Andy: Just tell me about who you...tell me about yourself.

Researcher: Well, I already told you that I'm a doctoral student in Education at Michigan State University. I study how Black students are treated in schools.

That's what I do. I am a wife and mother. I'm a...

Andy: How many kids you got?

Researcher: Two, a girl and a boy. I'm...

Andy: Is your husband white?

Researcher: No. He's Black.

Andy: Really? For real you married to a Black dude?

Researcher: Yes, really. He's a doctoral student, too. He studies philosophy.

Andy: You Black, right?

Researcher: Excuse me?

Andy: Are you Black or African American?

Researcher: I'm Black. I told you that before.

Andy: But sometimes, you talk like I'm not sure. Like "By our you mean Black people?" You know what I mean. You know what I mean?

Researcher: I'm confident that I know what you mean, but I have to make sure or...

Andy: Confident.

Researcher: Andy...

Andy: You confident. Just say yes.

Researcher: You know, in many ways this a normal conversation. But I'm going to be asked to prove, to defend that I'm accurately representing what you say.

That is very important to me. So sometimes I have to ask stupid questions. And the language I use has to show that I know what I'm doing.

Andy: Yeah. That's all good. You gotta do you, I mean, like... I don't know what you could say or language to use that will make them count Black people's votes.

That's what you trying to do? I don't know, basically, if that's like going to work.

Andy worked to determine how trustworthy I was based on my understanding of my own racial identity, and the racial identity of my husband (not to mention his evaluation of my decision to code-switch). The more I got to know Andy, the more he seemed to hold to the belief popular in Black nationalist circles that it was my revolutionary duty to perpetuate the race (Beale, 1995). Eventually, though, he was convinced of my commitment to the struggle. (The incentives helped.) Mike was less concerned about the money, which he told me he gave to his mother anyway. For him, it was important to know whether or not I was a snitch:

Mike: So how I know if I tell you some shit, if I say some shit to you and you think that shit's illegal or something, that you won't tell somebody?

Researcher: Well, I would tell somebody if I thought that you or someone else was in danger.

Mike: Then you should tell somebody then, cause a nigga is always in danger.

Researcher: That's very true. But I'm referring to a specific danger, if you told me you planned to kill someone, for example.

Mike: So I can say anything else, besides if I wanna kill somebody?

Researcher: They call it imminent harm. So it's more than just homicide, it's to protect you or other people from getting hurt in any way. If I can help it.

Remember when you signed the consent form...

Mike: That piece of paper? Because that piece of paper don't mean nothing. My man got a piece of paper right now that say he can't cross the state line. You know where he at right now? Whether you tell or you don't tell. That's up to you.

Researcher: True. What you're saying is true. But in addition to my professional obligation to protect you to the best of my ability, I don't want to see you get hurt. So I would tell someone if I thought you were going to hurt. But I will also protect your right to talk to me, to be a part of this, and to say things about yourself and your life that aren't harmful, even if they are illegal.

Mike: ...So it's like I'm doing me, I'm writing my paper, fuck the police.

Researcher: Not really fuck the police so much. More.... You know, I believe that the police's job will be easier if I can understand what you're going through, the factors that influence your decisions. I think we need the space to be honest about our struggle so that we can respond to it...more effectively.

Mike: Yeah... I think that's cool though that you would be like, No I got nothing to say. That's what's up.

Mike rejected the legitimacy of the consent protocol. He wanted to know if he could trust me, and over Tim Horton's doughnuts one Wednesday I think he began to. As his disclosures became more intimate, I knew he believed that I was down, truly down, in that urban-street-solidarity kind of way. Like Nurse, Andy and Mike, Dawanna was also concerned about my intentions. She wanted assurances that I would not portray her as foolish to white people.

Dawanna: You ever seen on Youtube when that Black man was saying about

them leprechauns, and then everybody thought he was a fool for that? Those people made him look like a fool!

Researcher: Yes, I did see that. I think it was staged, I think they were all acting,

Dawanna: But for you, what people made him look foolish?

Dawanna: You know, when people wrote the comments they was talking about niggers and how stupid Black people is and stuff. So they was just being themselves and then prolly joking but white people then say, “Look at them stupid ass niggers being crazy.” And that’s like this, you know, like trying to tell somebody something and not telling it right, or having them not believe you. I don’t know what you gonna write and make me look bad or something.

Trust is not colorblind.

The language that could have expressed that I keep it real at MSU, that I am married to a Black man, that I am not a snitch and I would not make anyone look like a “stupid ass nigger” was left out of the consent protocol. According to Mike, even if such language had been included it would have meant very little. The criteria of trustworthiness are not written on paper, they are learned and met through interaction. Recognizing that qualitative research is rather voyeuristic, my co-researchers responded with a reciprocal voyeurism. Our time together was filled with questions about my romantic life, political affiliations, approach to parenting and record of church attendance. These direct and sometimes unsettling inquiries would be offensive in almost any other setting. But I could not reasonably ask them to answer my questions if I did not answer the questions they posed of me. It was easy to take my co-researchers seriously, to establish relationships with them, and to listen to what they had to say. It was difficult

to accept that, after almost four years of graduate study, I didn't have answers to all of the problems they articulated in their civic lives. Ironically, my lack of expertise in practical civic problem solving positioned me as a participant within their struggles, thus increasing my overall trustworthiness. And struggle we did. They worked to share and reflect on their stories. I worked emphasize my qualities as listener, potential role model, cultural publics relation agent, informal therapist, sexual nationalist and maybe even character witness during a trial for a yet uncommitted crime. They promised not to bullshit me. I promised to understand and represent them fairly, in the best light possible, with insight from our shared experiences and consideration of their particular contexts. Our shared understanding of research integrity, along with expectations of cultural identity and role fulfillment, served as the basis for establishing interpersonal trust. It's possible that civic sphere is similarly constituted. Or, it may be that there is no concept of "civic trust" distinguishable from interpersonal trust.

CHAPTER FOUR

Methods.

As stated, the purpose of this study was to describe the meaning of civic disempowerment as it occurs in the lived experience of Black dropouts, as the basis for countering social-ontological theories of Black cultural deficits. A secondary purpose was to explore if and how lived experiences of the civic, specifically narratives of disempowerment, correspond to the tenets of CRT and the philosophy of racial realism (Bell, 1992a; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006). These purposes were pursued in relation to two broad research questions:

1. What meanings do Black youth attribute to the lived experience of civic disempowerment?
2. What institutional and social processes inform these meanings?

Minimally, the selected method of data collection and analysis needed to provide means for identifying and describing the factors that contribute to civic disempowerment. It also must account for the tenets of CRT as they manifested throughout the research process. This secondary objective included the incorporation of the Black autobiographic voice in determining how and why civic disempowerment exists, and the conceptual space to craft an end product that challenged the liberal framework. In Chapter 3, I argued that CRM and phenomenology are uniquely capable of providing insight into the depth and complexity of civic disempowerment, and how they are informed or structured by race relations. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the research design. Specifically, I discuss the methods of data collection and analysis, including the recruitment and selection of co-researchers and nature of the interviews, and the strategies to enhance the

validity and reliability of the findings.

Data collection.

My first contact with a potential co-researcher was on May 7, 2012. The previous weekend, an attempted burglary had developed into a double shooting in east Saginaw. There had already been thirteen homicides in the city, so the reaction to these non-fatal incidents was somewhat subdued. For me, it served as a reminder to survey the geography of gang violence in the city. I started asking pastors and community leaders about neutral meeting locations, neighborhood spaces without recent histories of violence and where my co-researchers might feel relaxed enough to talk. With a meeting place secured, there were a host of other questions to answer. Would inviting co-researchers from only one side of the city invalidate my data? Was I aware of appropriate local resources? A quote from Bibi Bakare-Yusuf's (1999) *The Economy of Violence: Black Bodies and the Unspeakable Terror* kept scrolling through my mind, about how the Black body in pain "is not able to participate fully in civic life, because pain destroys the capacity of language; the body is denied the facilities that make subjectivity possible" (p. 317). Did my conception of civic adequately account for the implications of pain, or the potential of destroyed capacity? There was a surprising amount of literature written on conducting qualitative research in contexts the reality of racial and gang violence, but it offered no concrete solutions. The methodology described in Chapter 3 and the research design described below reflect my attempts to build upon this work. My co-researchers' accounts of violence, and they ways in which they were structured into the themes, are discussed in Chapter 5.

Recruitment.

It has been theorized that the existence and rate of high school dropouts affects the “ability of schools to educate and prepare youth to assume the responsibilities of national and global citizenship”, a concern of specific relevance to minority youth and civic disempowerment (Sefa Dei, Mazzuca, & McIssac, 1997, p. 7). Though certainly education does not guarantee civic empowerment, “less than half of Americans (39%) without a high school degree voted in the elections of 2000 and 2004. In contrast, just over half of high school graduates, nearly two-thirds of Americans with some formal education beyond high school, and more than three-quarters of those with a college degree or higher, report having voted in the Presidential elections” (June, 2005, p. 5). Students who have not completed high school represent a “critical case” (Yin, 2003, p. 40) within the civic socialization system and discussions of civic capital gaps as they have been “deprived of full participation within the academic culture of schools” (Dunbar, 1999, p. 241). Dropouts are also “contemporary victims of the violence of education” (Sefa Dei, 2010, p. 8). Sefa Dei (2010) argues that:

we can see the issues of minority youth disengagement, dropouts and “pushouts” as the direct products of a reorganized colonial relations of schooling. We can point to many sources of alienation in school systems for minority youth. Youth alienation can be related to particular sociopolitical arrangements of schooling. (p. 8)

As such, dropouts have “strategic importance in relation to the general problem” of civic disempowerment (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 78), and will constitute a critical purposive sample sufficient for developing and assessing themes within and identifying the conceptual boundaries of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

After encountering some difficulty gaining access to students through GED programs in Lansing and Detroit, I called Ms. Inez Williams, a violence and substance abuse prevention specialist, church and community leader who heads a faith-based youth program in Saginaw. Ms. Williams is also one of my mother's closest friends. I read parts of Chapter 1 with her during our phone conversation, and she was very excited to help identify co-researchers for the study. She suggested seven potential co-researchers, all of whom were invited to participate and completed initial forty-five minute to hour-long interviews. During these sessions, I reviewed the purpose of the study, potential risks, the incentive structure, and reiterated the voluntary nature of participation using the consent protocol (*Appendix X*). Two men and two women expressed continued interest, were capable of communicating their understandings and experiences of civic engagement, and were able to schedule and make arrangements to keep interview appointments. Kevin, Christine, Nick and Neveah completed four interviews each. The data in this study comes from these conversations. An additional conversation with Neveah from a chance meeting at the home of a shared acquaintance is also included in the data set.

Interviews.

Van Manen (1997) suggests that the purpose of the phenomenological interview is to develop a “conversational relation” with the co-researcher about the meaning of their experience, and to explore and gather “experiential narrative material...that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (p. 66). Co-researchers were invited to an initial focus group interview. Focus group interviews “have been used to elicit and validate collective testimonies, to give voice to the previously silenced by creating a safe space for sharing one's life

experiences” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 54). Simply stated, focus groups are a series of interviews with small gatherings of individuals who share experiences or characteristics relevant to the phenomenon of interest. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2008) argue via Madriz (2000) that the focus group can be an empowering vehicle of data collection because it decenters the authority of the researcher and allows participants to connect and share experiences in a nurturing context (p. 383). The goal of the first interview with each co-researcher was to establish van Manen’s conversational relation, and to obtain the biographical information necessary for rooting the stories of my co-researchers stories within their lived context. Though I prepared questions for the first interview to encourage the conversation as needed (*Appendix X*); my co-researchers generally guided our conversations through their interpretation of the study’s purpose.

Remaining conversations took place in the form of unstructured individual interviews over a period of five months. Most of the transcribed data presented was taken from individual interviews. During our first one-on-one conversations together, Kevin, Nick, Christine and Neveah often self-monitored by changing the subject if they felt they strayed from my expectations. This was initially a useful practice, because it allowed me to gauge the types of topics that they deemed manifestly political or related to civic. During subsequent conversations, however, I began to focus more on exploring the essences that might illuminate my co-researchers’ experiences with civic disempowerment. I responded to self-monitoring by encouraging them to finish their thought or story before they attempted to redirect the conversation back to the themes they associated with my expectations. I became very interested in what they identified as civic information, the meaning associated with this information, and how these meanings

structured their understandings of civic life. Using the tenets of CRT, specific attention was also devoted to how these meanings connected to or disrupted racial-historical schemas. All interviews were audio-recorded, and a journal was maintained to document overall impressions of the interview, as well as my perceptions of conversational pauses, facial expressions and body language. Co-researchers were given \$10 VISA gift cards for each hour they participated in scheduled interviews. In total, this study reports the analysis of approximately 25 hours of interviews. The multiple-interview study design allowed for a thorough analysis from shared and individual perspectives. No significant divergence emerged in focus group and individual accounts of civic disempowerment.

Data analysis.

Data collection and analysis were interconnected, and I began to contextualize the experiences and meaning shared by my co-researchers early in the interview process. This was aided by maintaining reflective field notes, listening to the recorded interviews immediately following and in preparation for conversations, open coding, and immersion within the community to enhance my understanding. After the interviews were completed, continued manual interpretive analysis was informed by Moustaka's modified van Kaam method and the methodological recommendations of CRM to identify possible themes and patterns that emerged from the conversations. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) suggest searching and sifting through the data for examples of desired concepts, which included stories of civic engagement, civic empowerment, race, racial identity, and race consciousness. To apply this strategy within Moustaka's method, I identified and treated examples of the desired concepts as "meaning units," or, words, sentences and phrases that directly pertain to the phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994, p. 184). Through

horizontalization, I listed every relevant meaning unit and afforded each equal descriptive value. Meaning units were then reduced, or categorized into broader themes; and eliminated as necessary. Elimination included deleting meaning units that did not refer to the research questions, as well as overlapping and repetitive meaning units. This process was further guided by three criteria as suggested by Moustakas:

1. Were the storylines expressed explicitly in the complete transcription?
2. Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed?
3. Have storylines that are not explicit or compatible been deleted? (p. 121).

The remaining meaning units were considered the invariant constituents, or horizons, of the experience. I worked to identify topical, thematic or experiential similarities across multiple stories and looked for useful ways to communicate these similarities in relation to the research question. As patterns of relevance began to emerge regarding the experience of civic engagement, themes were defined and described with greater precision. Clustering was the process through which these themes were arranged to provide a consistent representation of particular meaning units across the research questions and co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994). Using this process, 20 meaning units were identified. The reduction and clustering of these meaning units is represented in Table X. I used the experiences shared by Kevin, Christine, Nick and Neveah to answer the first research question, “What meanings do Black youth attribute to the lived experience of civic disempowerment?”

Table 1 Organization and Reduction of Themes

Theme	Subthemes	Reduced Meaning Units
Civic Boredom	<i>The politics of cultural affirmation</i>	Civic socialization, irrelevance, disinterest, lack of news outlets, disconnect with historical memory
	<i>Evaluating uncertain investments</i>	Civic illiteracy, apathy, structural barriers to civic opportunity, no sense of belonging/investment, powerlessness
Civic Risk	<i>The dimensions of trust</i>	Conceptions of self, us vs. them, politicians as liars, civic misinformation, conspiracy theories,
	<i>Fatal fidelities</i>	Historical memories of violence and struggle, first hand experience with violence, institutional violence, gang violence, understandings of racism

Credibility.

Once arranged, the final themes of *civic boredom* and *civic risk* provided the insight needed for me to narratively recreate the civic space that my co-researchers inhabit.

Toward answering Lincoln and Guba's (1985) question, "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?" (p. 290), I outline how data collection was conducted with concern for the overall credibility of the study. According to Yin (2003), incorporating multiple lines of data from varying sources helps to corroborate a study's findings. This corroboration yields "converging lines of evidence" that produce "more convincing and accurate" findings for a study (p. 98). To achieve this accuracy, the methods of this study allowed for data source triangulation, wherein data collected from multiple sources is anticipated to produce mutually reinforcing results (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In addition to the sources that comprise cultural intuition suggested by Solórzano and Yosso (2002) (primary sources, academic and referred literature and personal experience), a reflexive research journal was maintained and member checking was conducted. The journal was used to make "experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings visible and an acknowledged part of

the research design, data generation, analysis, and interpretation process” (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 703). I also used the journal to maintain a record of the decisions I made in directing and reshaping the research process and representing the research findings.

To further assure the credibility of the study, member checking ensured the accuracy and reliability of the counter-stories’ interpretation and representation. Member checking was applied as an intentional and ongoing process of verification within and across interviews. After the final in-person interview, the two themes of interest were explained to and accepted or modified by the co-researchers to ensure that the themes were accurate representations of civic life and experiences. The final themes were shared through a phone conversation, with the presentation of major themes and responses of co-researchers to these themes represented in Table 1. The process of member checking added richness to the final analysis and recommendations. While my understanding of their civic experiences continues to unfold and evolve, I attempt to present the final themes through the stories told by my four co-researchers as narrators, illuminating in turn the structures of these experiences, the feelings evoked, and how these feelings contribute to systems of meaning that influence interpersonal and institutional understandings of civic life. The end result is intended to explain and give meaning to the experience of civic disempowerment. In reporting these meanings, thick description was used to describe and assign action to social action and phenomenon. Thick description

...presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description,

the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard.

(Denzin, 1989, p. 83)

Credibility was further established through immersion in the context, a process that included reviews of the sociological features of my co-researchers cultural and generational cohort, engaging the forms of entertainment and social networking that they found meaningful, and attending the restaurants, churches and retail establishments that shaped their social and civic lives.

Table 2 Member Checking Results

Theme	Co-Researcher	Response
Civic boredom: the feeling that I've been excluded from civic and political life by forces outside of my control. The way things are in civic and political life does not always meet my expectations and or seem relevant to me. I am generally bored and disinterested with civic or political information, and I feel that my participation in civic and political life wouldn't really change things.	Kevin	Acceptance
	Nick	Revision: <i>(paraphrase)</i> Boredom stems from an inability to understand.
	Christine	Acceptance
	Neveah	Acceptance
Civic risk: the feeling that my safety and the safety of people I care about would be at risk if I were very involved in civic and political life. I generally don't trust politicians and civic leaders. Black people's history of civic and political struggle, violence, sacrifice, and corruption in local and national politics have a big impact on how I view civic and political life.	Kevin	Unable to contact
	Nick	Revision: I don't trust the police.
	Christine	Acceptance
	Neveah	Revision: I feel unsafe constantly, not just in political life.

CHAPTER FIVE

Research Context and Co-Researcher Profiles.

The context.

To understand civic life in Saginaw, you have to understand a little something about Saginaw in general. I offer a representative, but far from exhaustive history of Saginaw, with emphasis on the unique ways that racial violence and organized labor inform the present civic climate. Saginaw is home to a culture, population and labor force distinctly shaped by the Black northern migration of the mid-twentieth century (McKether, 2011; McKether, 2011b). Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, churches were built, lodges were founded, and social justice organizations were chartered to serve and sustain the growing Black community. Early Black residents included those escaping the bondage of cotton slavery, the constraints of sharecropping, and the violence of southern Jim Crow (McKether, 2005). Hidden between iconic Black cultural centers in Idlewild to the northwest and Detroit to the southeast, the Black community in Saginaw grew and adjusted through the rise and decline of the lumbering era to establish formidable influence in organized labor and the reconstitution of the lower middle class during the rise of the automotive industry. Continued Black migration included veterans of a segregated military, college educated Southerners and middle-class union leaders who shifted the political culture of the city over the next few decades (McKether, 2011). As a result, the 1950s and 1960s were defined by such events as a citywide sit-in at segregated restaurants and a July 27, 1967, race riots over the commitments of Black political leadership and educational and economic opportunity injured many residents, including women and children (McKether 2011b).

Through the 1970s and 80s, ghettos throughout the Midwest doubled in size and population (Kasarda, 1993; Jargowsky, 1994). Over that same time in Saginaw, they tripled (Census, 1991). As urban sprawl grew over the next two decades, Saginaw would also become one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States (Warner, 2006). Economically, it would devolve from “one of Michigan’s most dynamic industrial/manufacturing centers” to a site of abandoned factories, aging houses, and dwindling social welfare infrastructure (Pugh Smith & Nriagu, 2011, p. 82). Stories of manufacturing plant closings and forced early retirement are common during the church testimony services and job skills training workshops I frequented when looking for potential co-researchers. Saginaw has the second highest rate of children living in poverty in Michigan (Bureau, 2012). Public schools are closing, recreation spending was halted in 2007, and the city has been forced to cancel road maintenance spending (Morgan & Shetty, 2011). Chronic unemployment and population loss caused by deindustrialization, together with uneven fiscal development throughout the state, place the city firmly within the urban rustbelt (Matthews, Maume, & Miller, 2001; Morgan & Shetty, 2011).

The crime rate in Saginaw is higher than those of many major urban cities (Skidmore & Scorsone, 2011). From 2002 – 2010, the Federal Bureau of Investigations listed Saginaw as the most violent city *per capita*, with violence defined as murder, non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. While Camden, NJ earned this distinction in 2011, Saginaw remained second on the list. One of the most painful parts of writing this chapter has been returning to this section to update the homicide statistics. As of December 24, 2012, 30 homicides have occurred, 26 of which have been ruled criminal. Almost anyone will tell you that one advantage of growing up

in the hood is the potential of possessing some measure of street credibility. But despite its growing notoriety for violence, conditions in Saginaw are often overshadowed by those in Detroit, a ninety-minute drive down I-75 South in good weather. Reminders of the street's capacity to erupt in violence are everywhere. The security guards at Chuck E. Cheese are Sheriff's deputies in bulletproof vests. When you leave the movie theater, you're asked to walk around the back of the building to your car – a strategy that keeps crowds from forming in the lobby, reducing the potential of Friday night fistfights. Besides Chuck E. Cheese and the movie theater, which are technically in Saginaw Township, inexpensive entertainment is hard to come by. The city has sparse retail offering, few grocery stores, and a handful of museums surrounded by second hand stores, fast food restaurants, payday loan offices, empty lots and an assortment of abandoned buildings. Recognizing that homicide, unemployment, and a varyingly stagnant labor market uniquely shape Saginaw's civic sphere, it isn't surprising that most civic protest in the city are attempts to draw attention to gang violence or to support organized labor.

The co-researchers.

Fourteen of the homicides in 2012 were victims 21 or younger. In light of Bakare-Yusuf's (1999) theory of the Black body in pain and the struggles of civic subjectivity, my four co-researchers' commitments to naming with me exemplify traditions of voice and self-determination. They are so much more than the limited pictures I attempt to paint below. I share their stories with specific attention to the attributes and aspects of their personal histories that I feel are most relevant to the study. It is useful to note that all four self-identify as Black, and by the spring of 2012, all had

withdrawn from high school prior to completion. Each was born and raised in Saginaw and had extended family networks in the area. None were gainfully employed, but each made ends meet through various hustles or under the table arrangements. CRM offers no empirical defense of an appropriate sample size. The sample size of CRT directed research has varied, as evidenced by an overview of only some of the research referenced by this study: 10 participants for a study on African American male disenfranchisement in schools (Howard, 2008), 12 participants for a study on CRT pedagogies (Lynn, 1999), 9 participants for a study on high achieving African American students' constructions of achievement (Carter D. , 2008a), 20 participants for a study on cultivating critical race consciousness (Carter D. , 2008b), and 34 participants across 10 focus groups for a study on microaggressions and campus climate (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Contact was initiated with seven potential co-researchers, the final total of four is defended for two reasons. First, it proved a large enough sample to extract rich counter-stories, while small enough to allow data saturation or redundancy (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Second, it proved a manageable research population in consideration of practical concerns, such as scheduling interviews and managing the incentive structure. The four co-researchers will serve as key informants concerning the subject of inquiry. Data saturation was achieved with these four, and I feel personally and theoretically equipped to share their stories of civic engagement.

I devoted much of the first interview to understanding these experiences in context. This included collecting the objective facts of my co-researchers daily lives: the circumstances around their decision to leave school, details of their living arrangements and familial relationships, their level of and interest in community service, for example. It

also included developing preliminary insights into who each co-researcher was as a person. Each mentioned God more than once, highly valued friendships and kinship networks, and expressed a love for their hometown that eclipsed all the empirical data on its structural decline. But as discussed in Chapter 4, the process of getting to know and trust one another extended throughout and beyond our conversations. The continued project of summarizing and categorizing the details of their lives and stories to present a coherent analysis in some ways obscures the subtle divergences in their narratives, the process of shifting through wonderfully ordinary exchanges to make sense of them in relation to the research pursuit is painfully reductive. As a result, it is important for me to highlight when possible what made my four co-researchers stand out to me as individuals, the moments when I took notes on aspects of their identity, strengths and vulnerabilities that provided a personal frame of reference for understanding their civic and broader struggles. One such moment occurred during the set of initial interviews. Near the end of the first individual conversations, I asked my co-researchers to tell me about something that excited them. After introducing each co-researcher, I share their response to this prompt. I conclude this section by reflecting on how I used their answers to develop insight into their civic lives.

Kevin.

Kevin was the first co-researcher I met during the interviewing process. During our first conversation, he chastised recording artist Rihanna for performing with her ex-boyfriend Chris Brown, who was convicted in 2009 for an assault that resulted in Rihanna's hospitalization. Kevin spoke often about Black women's self-presentation and self-respect (or lack thereof), a tendency he attributed to the unusually high standards set

for his girlfriends by his single mother. At nineteen years old, Kevin has mastered the *cool pose* and all of its attendant mannerisms: our rapport initially struggled as he glared at me with brooding brown eyes, kept his arms folded, responded with disinterest to my questions and repeatedly stated his suspicion of my motives (Majors & Billson, 1992). Despite his best efforts, however, he couldn't mask his intellect or his eagerness to assess the civic state of his hometown. It became evident that he had seriously thought about his relationship to systems of civic authority before. Of all the co-researchers, he was best able to articulate the challenges he faced in civic life, and the despair he felt facing his civic future. Kevin's withdrawal from high school was especially perplexing, considering his intelligence, a high level of familial support, and the fact that he was less than six months from degree completion when he chose to drop out. He said left school to help care for his one year old son and girlfriend. The new family abruptly left the state during the previous school year to reconnect with his father and find employment in Georgia, only to return to Kevin's mother's home a few weeks before the research began. In most of our conversations, Kevin attempted to mask his grief over the recent shooting death of a friend and his fear that he would be unable to provide for his son.

Kevin is currently awaiting sentencing for his participation in an armed robbery. I was dismayed but not surprised by Kevin's arrest and incarceration. His obvious ability, his anger, his inability to secure meaningful employment, his professed apathy toward law enforcement and his growing interest in the power vacuum developing in a local gang made his body a postmodern powder keg of racial and economic angst. I hoped that his relationship with and sense of responsibility to his son might serve to defuse the potentially destructive consequences of the eventual explosion. This hope stemmed from

the conversation I had with Kevin about what excited him, during which he articulated with considerable enthusiasm how rewarding the experience of fatherhood had been for him:

Researcher: I want to thank you for coming out today, Kevin, and for taking this so seriously. You've already given me a lot to think about, which is great. I'm looking forward to learning more about you as a political actor and member of this community. But I know there's more to your life than politics. What interests or excites you on a day to day basis?

Kevin: Oh...the first thing I think of, is probably something like doing this father thing, watching my son grow up. I know that sounds kind of gay, though, right? Um, but that really, since he's been born, it's just like that's the thing I want to see most. It does excite me, I know some niggas out here don't care bout they kids, about they sons especially, and I know I thought before that I wasn't going to be this type of father. But everything he does is exciting. Everything because he sees it for like the first time or whatever and I get to see it like that, too, with him.

Christine.

Christine is always seconds away from fits of uncontrollable laughter. Her laughter hides her discomfort with the interview process due to her struggles translating her thoughts into "smart language". I also interpreted it as a form of coping mechanism: since she laughed most after sharing stories of her own sexual assault, her mother's abuse, or cases of police brutality. Though she never cried during any of our

conversations, she was often on the verge of tears, so she started bringing a female friend with her as a distraction. In the presence of her girlfriend she seemed much stronger. Christine is nineteen, but she looks and sounds about four years younger. Her young appearance is in part due to the semi-constant laughter, but also because of her behavior. Her stories are full of impulsiveness, extreme sensitivity to perceived criticism, and her difficulty comprehending questions and instructions. These traits greatly contributed to her decision to leave school, eventually the daily academic and emotional expectations became too much for her to manage. She perceives herself as incapable of most social, academic and civic tasks. Still, as the homicide rate rose over the summer, Christine's understanding of her civic position developed from denial to hesitant acceptance of her own agency as she began to consider how "ordinary people" might potentially find a solution to the violence in her community. She lives alternately with her mother or with her boyfriend's family, whichever setting has the least drama on any given day. She spends most of her time babysitting or working odd jobs to feed her hair habit – she is a masterful though unlicensed beautician who dramatically restyles her own hair at least three times a month.

In addition to her runway worthy hair sculpting skills, Christine has a beautiful singing voice, a growing babysitting clientele, and her lasagna is reportedly a church potluck legend. Her devastating insecurity becomes increasingly apparent as she laughs away my suggestions of completing her GED, earning a cosmetology license, becoming a licensed childcare provider or finding work at a local soul food restaurant:

Christine: “I’m good enough for what I do, but not for like anything like that. My teacher told me that with all of that you have to do numbers, you know, with taxes and paperwork. And I’m not, I just can’t!”

Christine recognized her own low self-esteem, her occasional inability to handle stress, her general lack of assertiveness, and propensity to outbursts of emotion with those closest to her. She agreed with her boyfriend that she was “hard to handle”, a condition that worsened after being raped the previous fall. Christine seemed happiest when discussing or exerting her control over her own self-presentation. When I asked her what excited her, she talked about finding unique and fashionable shoes that attracted positive attention from others:

Researcher: So, Christine, I’m very appreciative that you’re willing to participate in this with me. I want to get to know you as a potential voter, as a citizen, that’s all part of the study. But I also want to get to know you as a person, because I feel like all of that is interconnected. What do you think?

Christine: I don’t know. Maybe...

Researcher: Maybe? Okay. Okay. Well, before we wrap up today, I’d love to know a little about what makes you tick as a person. As Christine. Tell me about something that excites you.

Christine: Exciting? Oo, like, oo, when I first get paid and I know my girls go to the D and I get to shop for shoes. Because in Saginaw, there’s like a lot of places to go for basic shoes, you know, like shoes to wear to work or to school or something. And then church shoes, like the ones that a first lady or something wear. But if you want shoes like the ones you see on TV you can’t do that here.

So it is always exciting to me to go somewhere where I can get shoes that I know nobody else has, like I got these sueded cow print booties, like spots like on a cow, they brown and kind of off white, with sparkly buckles and some tricks be hating. You know? But most everybody is like, “Ooo where you get those?” And I lie, or I don’t tell them.

Nick.

When I met Nick, it was almost as if hardcore gangsta rap start to play in the background. He quickly confirmed that Tupac, DMX and The Game, were his favorite rappers, and he modeled himself after their self-presentations. True to this form, his oversized tees and sweatpants, immaculately lined goatee and general demeanor were archetypal urban ghetto. Still, he was quick to remind me how hard his mother worked to expose him to “cultural shit” like community theater, Black history museums and a tour of historically Black colleges and universities. Out of respect for his mother’s efforts, he insisted that he’d attend college one day, though he was unsure of what his major might be. Nick is a quiet twenty year old who shrugged when I asked him why he left high school during his junior year. He shrugged often, actually, communicating a nonchalance that was sometimes difficult to negotiate in our conversations. But when he did start talking, he possessed a casual sense of rhythm and metaphor that also mimicked his preferred lyricists. He had very little interest in talking about civic engagement. When I mentioned the subtle political sensibilities of his role models, he again shrugged and insisted that they came from bigger cities, like Los Angeles or New York, where people actually paid attention to civic life. The poetry he shared with me was dark and violent, except one short tribute to he shared about his mother that praised her beauty and

independence. Nick sustained himself through a variety of under the table activity, most notably selling marijuana and burned CDs at local parties.

Nick's success in the black market, together with his physical attractiveness and laid back charm, earned him the distinction of being a "playa"; a young man with the desire to dominate his intimate partners, who sustains one or more long-term relationships while balancing girlfriends on the side, and who generally perceives sex as devoid of emotional attachment and a natural recompense for any monetary investment (Miller, 2008). Playas exploit their desirability within contexts of women's emotional vulnerabilities, gendered social hierarchies, the need for economic support and security, and negotiations for physical safety in climates of territorial gang violence. At 6'2 and 230 lbs., Nick existed in a social sphere in which he was economically and sexually powerful. In the civic sphere, however, his formal unemployment, lack of high school diploma and struggles with dominant English made him simultaneously powerless as an individual but intimidating as a symbol of Black masculinity and deviance. When I asked him what excited him, it didn't surprise me that his answer related to the sphere in which he was most respected and desired:

Researcher: Okay, so I'm going to be talking with you over the next several weeks to get a better understand of your life, what motivates you, what interests you. These are conversations about politics, but they're also conversations about you as a political actor and as a human being.

Nick: Right, right. Mmm hmm.

Researcher: So I'd like to know about your interests, the things that make you you. Tell me a little something about what excites you. What is exciting to you?

Nick: Aw, you.

Researcher: Get it together, Nick.

Nick: I'm playing, I'm playing. I mean, for real though. Women excite me. Not those fake ass hoes you see around. I'm talking real women.

Researcher: What do you mean by real woman?

Nick: I mean, you one. Fo sho. Like, women who talk right, work, if they have kids they don't just be leaving em everywhere while they try to party. Don't drink too much. Go to church. My mother. You could say like Michelle Obama or maybe, no, um, yeah um Regina King. Claire Huxtable. Real women. I was talking bout this the other day, like, not to be offending, but real women who know what kind of drawers to wear under what kind of pants they got on. The right panties and shit. That right there is exciting.

Neveah.

Neveah spoke constantly about her three-year-old son, whom she gave birth to when she was sixteen. She was very inquisitive - throughout our time together we probably exchanged the same number of questions – with a serious demeanor and a keen sense of sarcasm. She dropped out of high school in the eleventh grade when her mother got a new job at an attorney's office and could no longer care for the toddler full time. Initially, Neveah was notably reserved on most civic issues. For example, the topics of abortion, civil rights, gay marriage and terrorism drew passionate responses from my other co-researchers, but she never said more than a few words on either subject. This was especially interesting because Neveah read the newspaper more than any co-researcher, and was the only co-researcher who made intentional efforts to watch political

content (particularly President Obama's speeches) on television. She was also the most civically involved. Despite our inability to connect in certain conversations, Neveah would talk at length about her family and was very interested in my college experiences. She was also the only co-researcher with a detailed career plan: she wanted to leave Saginaw and complete a degree in nursing so that she could one day open a hospice center. Neveah didn't vote, and she was unaware that issues such as end of life care, assisted suicide, Medicare and medical licensure requirements were ever on the ballot. Once I told her, she became much more talkative and initiated conversations based on research she conducted at home. She was amazed at how many laws governed her career interest, and dismayed by the lack of protections afforded to the elderly. During our last session together, she shared her plans to relocate east of the city with her son to work as a home health care aide.

I was allowed insight into Neveah's passion for service and advocacy during our first conversation. She was the only co-researcher who asked questions about the consent form on the first day, and seemed to listen intently to my discussion of human research protection. She compared the consent process to the admission procedures at a nursing home where she volunteered:

Neveah: This is a lot like at [the nursing home]. When you get admitted, you have to sign papers about legal representatives and liability. So like, the residents can sue if they need to to make sure they taken care of. Because some of them Neveahs be like, um not doing they jobs and stuff. So I like this, because it says what you will do or won't do up front. But if you start acting all crazy I'm not in a

wheelchair or nothing, so I can just walk my own self up outta here. I'm just kidding!

Neveah's interest in the community service emerged again in our discussion of what excited her. She beamed as she expressed pride in her role as a church usher, a position she felt gave her authority and esteem even among older adults:

Researcher: We're almost at the end of our hour, so thank you for coming out and taking your morning to talk to me.

Neveah: You welcome.

Researcher: This is what I love to do, I'm really looking forward to talking with you over the next several weeks and learning more about you as a voter, as a mother, as a daughter, as a community member. So my last question for the day is, what keeps you motivated in all of those roles? What types of things excite you?

Neveah: What excites me personally? Wow, um...I am excited by like helping people. Helping people. That silly? I mean, regular stuff excites me, too. Not that anything too exciting happens around here on the day to day. But really, I just love being with people, and seeing them and knowing that I can be a part of their happiness. Cause I'm like a usher at my church, right, and not a lot of people my age want to do ushering. So because it's so boring or whatever. But it's not really boring, you gotta be watchful and like pay attention the whole time. And if we didn't come at our stuff correct, then the whole service would be off. And there is no other part of my life, I mean obviously I'm charge of my son's life, but there is no other other part of my life where adults, you know, like adults rely on me for

things like that. Or where I can say sit right here and people would say, yeah okay. And listen.

Exploring civic stirrings: discussion of themes.

I asked about excitement to elicit information about the interests, pleasures, and passions of my co-researchers, and to gauge how all of these feelings might translate to the civic sphere. Retrospectively, in light of CRT and phenomenology's respective commitment to stories, I may have received answers more in alignment with the methodological traditions of interest if I would have used a prompt more similar to: "Tell me about the last time you were excited." Despite my phrasing, my co-researchers graciously allowed access to their stories. In each response, I heard a story about excitement and possibility in intimate, peer or public relationships. Kevin shared a story about fatherhood and the hope of a meaningful future through his relationship with his son. Christine's story was about self-esteem and self-presentation, but also the potential of being considered socially desirable in her interactions with her peers. Nick told a story about Black womanhood and sexual interest that revolved around his understanding of and desire for relationships with a certain category of women (which seemed to include me). Neveah shared a story about service, and her developing capacity for servant leadership and authority within her church community. In the search for civic stirrings, each of these stories shows the importance of meaningful connections with other people and the potential of social gratification for my co-researchers. While civic relationships have traditionally been understood as those that determine access to power and capital, I suggest based on these stories that it might prove erroneous to depoliticize the meaning attributed to personal and community relationships that offer satisfaction or fulfillment.

Indeed, awareness of the concepts of excitement, family, control over self-presentation, sex and service strengthen the following analysis. These early conversations with my co-researchers greatly informed my understanding of subsequent narratives of civic life and civic empowerment.

Again, the task of the phenomenological method is to reveal the underlying structure of experience and then to focus on the qualities of the experience, with special attention to “the filling in or completion of the nature and meaning of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). In what follows, I present the data that answers the primary research question; “What meanings do Black youth attribute to the lived experience of civic disempowerment?” through the two most salient themes that emerged from the data. These themes are *civic boredom* and *civic risk*. I open each theme with a story that I hope captures the lived experience of one co-researcher in relation to that theme. The meaning I attributed to each theme is supported using direct quotes from the co-researchers. The themes presented do not provide an exhaustive account of the lived experience of civic life, and are not always mutually exclusive. Rather, they provide a useful lens through which to explore the experiences of my co-researchers. The objective of each section that follows is to illuminate the interrelationship between “the direct conscious description of experience and the underlying dynamics or structures that account for the experience” in order to provide “a central meaning and unity that enables one to understand the substance and essence of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 9). Occasionally, as recommended by the practice of cultural intuition, I use insight derived from my personal experiences as a lens through which to explore the experiences of my co-researchers. This includes the textual and emotional labor of sharing the themes in language that my

co-researchers and I consider appropriate to facilitating “experiential nearness” (van Manen, 1997, p. 61), or sharing the unique and particular insight derived from their stories with the objective of building a more holistic understanding of the civic.

CHAPTER SIX

Findings.

The purpose of this study was to explore the civic life of Black youth in Saginaw, MI, with specific attention to the perceived nature of and meaning attributed to the experience of civic disempowerment. In Chapter 6, I used the first two interview questions to provide a descriptive account and conceptualization of civic disempowerment. In this chapter, I elaborate more on the structural and experiential features of civic spaces and the meaning attributed to these features. These meanings were developed through two themes: *civic boredom* and *civic risk*. I also use this space to share how I made sense of the experiences communicated to me, and how I understood and engaged their theoretical significance. Throughout, I reflect on personal understandings that influenced how co-constructed a meaningful, collective account that speaks directly to understandings of self and empowerment in Christine, Kevin, Nick and Neveah's civic lives.

Civic boredom.

The theme of civic boredom encompasses feelings of disappointment, frustration, apathy, disinterest and apathy within civic life. This theme illustrates the lack of meaningful civic opportunity, as well as the previous observation that there is no discrete conception of the civic for my co-researchers. Economic marginalization and cultural isolation diminish civic, social and spiritual life for my co-researchers. It consists of two subthemes: "the politics of cultural affirmation" and "evaluating uncertain investments". It also speaks to the CRT tenets of *whiteness as property*, *the value of marginalized knowledge* and *the critique of liberalism*. I introduce this theme with experiences shared by Christine, whose pervasive sense of inefficacy prevented her from reporting her rape

to authorities. This experience compounded a preexisting sense of worthlessness, and Christine's growing pain, fear and hopelessness left her somewhat civically jaded. She shared that she struggles to get out of bed every morning, and then to get off of the couch after each of two daily naps. As a recent dropout, she attributes much of her current sleeping habits to the abrupt loss of the structure that high school provided. But she acknowledges this behavior began before she left the tenth grade, and that her schooling experience was plagued by tardiness, absences and frequently dozing off in class. The monotony of Christine's life causes her days to blur together, and she provides mumbled descriptions of one long nap, punctuated by episodes of People's Court, Maury and Love and Hip-Hop:

Christine: I mean, sometimes I don't even know what day it is. So you call and its like oh my God it's Tuesday and I won't even know.

I generally meet with Christine on Tuesday mornings, but that's due to my time commitments, not her own. For Neveah, Kevin and Nick as well, there is little distinction between the weekdays and the hours within them: they don't go to school, they don't have jobs, and they don't have cars. The research project provided a rare creative outlet for Christine, who expressed with some measure of exasperation, "There's nothing to do here! This city..." About midway through the data collection process, I was surprised when she struggled to stay awake during one of our conversations. When I asked her why she was so tired, she laughed. As it turned out, she and her boyfriend had gotten into a heated argument a few days before. His response was to shut her out completely, refusing to speak with her and ignoring her phone calls and texts. The night before we met, she "broke down". After he got off of work, she walked the streets outside his home, called

his family's landline, sobbed on his doorstep and slapped street signs and mailboxes in his neighborhood until three in the morning when the police asked her to leave. More as a woman than as a researcher, I asked what this young man possessed that could motivate such a display. Christine smiled and explained in slang and euphemisms of increasing obscenity that her boyfriend was a very skilled lover. Young love and incredible sex prompted Christine to risk her personal safety, reputation and freedom to reconnect with her boyfriend. Before getting to know Christine's story, it would be easy to adopt a deficit perspective and assume that her lack of civic engagement stemmed from willful ignorance, malignant apathy or laziness. But seeing the passion in her eyes when she talked about Kendrick was a direct challenge to that line of thinking.

While Christine's constant need for her boyfriend's attention and mental distraction from reality is distinct to her narrative, the absence of meaningful interactions external to the familial unit is not. My first insight into the lack of social activity in the lives of my co-researchers developed from observations of their attire for our meetings. They came dressed in Friday night best: brilliant white tees and one shoulder tops with sparkling gladiator sandals. They presented their bodies in exciting ways, affirming their personality, style and sexuality. This spoke to their desire to present themselves to me as individuals, to prove and perform their agency in a study designed to inquire about their disempowerment. Despite the casual atmosphere I worked to create, they continued to wear clothes appropriate for the clubs that Saginaw doesn't have. One day Christine wore a colorblock maxi dress with an asymmetrical hem and teal platform sandals. Her hair was firmly gelled into a sculptured golden weave with fiery red tips on the bangs. I compliment her, and she feigns disinterest but goes into detail about the sale price of the

dress, the hours in the salon bargaining for tracks, and the difficulty of walking in the sandals – they're at least three inches.

Researcher: Well, you look amazing. What are your plans for today?

Christine: Just this.

Researcher: Just this? I'm honored that you dressed up for me.

Christine: I mean, I just wanted to wear it. I never get to wear it 'cause there's nothing to do here.

Barbalet (1999) defines boredom as the emotional feeling of anxiety stemming from the perceived lack of significant of an activity, situation, or a life (p. 632). Boredom evolved as a theme from my co-researchers' senses of their own lack of power and control, the social disaffiliation associated with poverty, and isolation from real world events. These descriptions are grounded in the structural realities that contour their daily lives. For example, during the months that the research took place, the city of Saginaw experienced record violence. Leaving the house, even during sunlit hours, was increasingly done only out of necessity. Unemployment and underemployment were high, so cash and meaningful labor were low. Information was restricted: free media included a monthly community newsletter that consisted mostly of church events and editorials, and an urban radio station with no news programming. My co-researchers claim to have outgrown the community centers, and there were no public pools in a summer of record heat. The only mall is thirty-minute bus ride from their homes, and they had no money anyway. The end result was a chronic lack of mental and physical activity. To break the monotony, my co-researchers seek out momentary escapes from the feelings of anxiety. This includes living vicariously through a favorite television show,

savoring a chance to flirt, seeking out a chance to get high, or taking the chance to feel the rush brought on by evading the security guard at Burlington Coat Factory after stealing a pair of earrings. Needless to say, this can result in misdemeanors, bad relationships and continued civic exclusion. But it also reiterates the fact that for them, boredom is rarely ever a choice.

The politics of cultural affirmation.

We meet my co-researchers *in the midst of* their civic stories. When I first wrote the preceding sentence, it read ‘We meet my co-researchers *early* in their civic stories.’ I decided, however, that that was a misrepresentation of their experiences. Like all of us, Christine, Nick, Neveah and Kevin didn’t spontaneously manifest in the civic sphere at the age of eighteen. Instead, they began learning the philosophies and practices that would shape their understandings of civic life long before they legally entered adulthood. Throughout their lives, they developed certain expectations about how the civic is structured, appropriate civic performances, and their capacity as civic agents. Some of these expectations emerged when I asked my co-researchers about formative encounters with civic knowledge. Each shared a civic coming-of-age story in which they grappled with questions about what it means to be Black in civic spaces. Their stories also revealed patterns of civic socialization that prioritized a certain conception of cultural identity in the determination of civic expectations. This resulted in shared and specific understandings of the cultural role of a Black president, the nature of civic life, and avenues for civic participation. Considering that our conversations took place the summer before the 2012 presidential election, it is not surprising that these stories often referenced the candidacy, campaigns and elections of President Barack Obama. Their

stories also expressed a longing for cultural affirmation in the civic sphere, which I'll define here as patterns of interaction that are derived from or complimentary to a social group's ways of thinking and doing. In the context of oppressed groups, culturally affirming practices help members to "cope with the gravity they experience" in predominantly white settings (Carter D. J., 2007, p. 542). Other themes these stories illustrate include early introductions to political satire and critical political commentary, conceptions of race and racial-historical identity, and the ambiguous role of social studies curriculum in navigating civic knowledge.

For Nick, the prompt elicited the experience of watching actor-comedian Chris Rock as fictional presidential candidate Mays Gilliam in the comedy film *Head of State*. He recalled his grandfather laughing during the movie and insisting; "They'da shot that nigga so fast!" At the time, Nick didn't grasp the symbolism of the assassination of a Black president. A few years later in a high school social studies class, he would draw the conclusion that "every president who ever did anything for Black people, they shot that dude, man." Nick came to associate violence with Black civic progress:

Nick: You tell me, Ms. I'mma be a teacher, doctor, when's the last time you like saw a nigga or anybody get up and say "I'mma do something for Black people. I'mma do this or I'mma do that. You ain't seen it. Because the last niggas that did that, the last time everyone of them dudes is dead man. Everyone of them. They keep that shit real quiet but they make sure you know, man. That dude is dead, some crazy white dude ran up and capped that nigga.

Nick remembered laughing during the movie because, even though he didn't quite follow the plot, it affirmed in his mind that the way he understood the world could translate into

a political platform:

Nick: If they let me talk like I talk, like just say the things to answer the questions instead of trying to be all proper, like I could be president, man. I could do what Chris Rock did right there.

This was the first time Nick ever expressed an understanding of his own civic efficacy, specifically his belief that he was knowledgeable enough to perform (even as president!) within the civic sphere if he had the power to “create the etiquette for political participation (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 17). Acknowledging CRT’s claim that race is a founding category in hierarchical social systems, it stands to reason that the etiquette for political participation is grounded in racial etiquette, the “set of interpretive codes and racial meanings which operate in the interactions of daily life” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 62). Socially constructed rules of racial etiquette set parameters for how Black people interact with individuals in other racial groups, but also the ways in which they interact and establish solidarity with one another. When he first heard then Senator Obama speak, he admitted being frustrated with the politician’s presentation. “He a cool dude, you know, I’m not saying he not down or whatever. But he talk like a white dude, be real.” Nick’s tone betrayed his slight disappointment that President Obama hadn’t employed a more familiar oratory style.

Neveah held a similar preconception of how a Black president would perform Blackness. She remembered hearing the joke that Bill Clinton was the first Black president. She mistakenly interpreted the statement as an historical fact until the sixth grade. In a social studies class, she publically confused Clinton with Abraham Lincoln after her teacher mentioned that the latter might have been half-Black. “I thought maybe

that's who she was talking about, Clinton, because I had heard that before. So I said he was president when I was born." Neveah was quickly corrected, and chastised by the teacher.

Neveah: She said, um, she said I needed to like take my own history seriously.

She never explained what she meant though, she just said like whatever and kept on like dah, dah, dah. So I still didn't really know until later.

For an early civic experience, Neveah referenced a lyric from the Tupac Shakur song "Changes". Though she had heard the song countless times before, it only caught her attention as she watched a marathon of Shakur videos after President Obama's election. Shakur raps, "And although it seems heaven sent, we ain't ready to see a Black president."

Neveah: And after he said that, like I wondered why. Like, what to get ready for? So like, um, what is we supposed to be getting ready for? Or did he mean we like everybody or we like just us, you know? And now that we got one, I don't know what it wasn't ready for, cause like really... I mean, he is a good president. But not so different, to me, you know? Nothing to like be ready for. From other people like that, in Washington or whatever.

By referring to the election of a Black president as "heaven sent", Shakur alluded to the expectation that the election of a Black president would revolutionize social conditions for Black Americans. Stating that we weren't ready for this expectation to materialize suggests that the country, or communities within the country, would reject or be unable to harness the revolutionary potential of this shift in cultural and political discourse. Neveah anticipated these shifts, but she couldn't connect the election of a Black president to any

substantive change. Instead, she collapsed President Obama as a political figure with other actors in the government. For Neveah and others in the Black community, President Obama did not embody the militant, left of center “political Blackness” that characterized previous Black political leaders (Walters, 2007, p. 23).

Somewhat expectedly, Christine insisted that she didn’t have any early encounters with civic knowledge: “Nobody talks about that with me.” In a later and unprompted conversation, however, she shared her reflections on a march for nonviolence that took place in Saginaw. In response to increasing youth violence in the city, a group of pastor-activists called Parishioners on Patrol orchestrated a march intended to inspire one hundred days of nonviolence, beginning in October 2011 and concluding on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in 2012. Christine walked by with a friend to see whether or not she wanted to participate. In her mind, she had envisioned pastors and community members dressed in their Sunday best, singing church hymns in harmony as they prayed over throughout the streets of the city.

Christine: You know, in suit and dresses, maybe white dresses? And the men would wear Black suits. You carry some signs, you sing like songs about [singing] I shall not, I shall not be moved. You know?

When I asked her where these ideas came from, she referenced television programs she’d watched on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Her understanding of what it meant to participate in a non-violent civic struggle was greatly influenced by footage and images from civil rights marchers of the early 1960s. Once she arrived at the Parishioners on Patrol march, Christine was discouraged to see young people her age obviously embarrassed to be at the march with their parents. One local pastor was in a sweat suit, and several women

looked like they “was probably going clubbing or something next”. Christine was most frustrated to see a group of young girls texting, even as the march began to move down the street:

Christine: This is not what we supposed to be about. You can’t even just stop texting for one second to be part of something like this. Everybody so caught up in they personal business we can’t do what they used to do.

Researcher: I think that’s interesting, Wanna, but it’s also interesting to me that you critique them for texting during the march, but you didn’t march at all.

Christine: I mean... .. if you gonna do it, do it... .. I’m not gon be out there not committed. So if you just want to be texting, then you not committed. And if they not committed, basically it’s like it’s gonna be a waste of everybody’s time. If I could see it, don’t they think white people could see it?

Kevin was also aware of the march, though his critique was aimed at its failure to produce the intended result more than the general conduct of its participants:

Kevin: That shit don’t work no more. What they think, police gonna come up like “Oh my bad, we shot you fifty fucking times on accident?” Or like “We’ll just take all the crack back, my bad, though, didn’t mean that shit right there.”

Researcher: So if not a march, what would work, Kevin?

Kevin: Ain’t that what you supposed to tell me? Because basically, nobody know out here. But that old shit is out. Just for real.

Evaluating uncertain investments.

It would be difficult to define any realm of social interaction in its totality with reference to only one behavior. All theorists should be careful not to “reduce the meaning

and importance of civic engagement to the simple act of voting” (Dudley & Gitelson, 2002, p. 180). Though voting is by no means the only way to be civically engaged, the suffrage struggle has been central to Black people’s demand for equal citizenship, and continues in its unique democratic and symbolic value. It makes sense, then, that voting represents the primary form of contemporary civic engagement for my co-researchers. The emphasis on voting often eclipsed other ways in which my co-researchers were involved in the civic sphere, including elder and familial care work, faith-based service, and mentoring. The expectation of low return for civic activity made civic engagement an uncertain investment. To better understand this uncertainty, I worked to better understand the significance attributed to voting and their willful lack of participation in the electoral process. I also sought to explore how the feelings associated with voting might inform understandings of other behaviors within the civic sphere, leading to the theme of civic apathy. Stories about voting – or more accurately, stories about not voting – emphasize the invariant constituents of low civic efficacy, low civic knowledge, and stories of civic conspiracies.

Each of my co-researchers had recently reached voting age, but had yet to exercise the right. Counting elections for City Council, the School Board and County Commissioner were held, as well as votes on different levies, the 2012 presidential primary and the 2012 general election, there had been at least six opportunities to vote in Saginaw since Christine, my youngest co-researcher, turned eighteen.

Christine: I never voted before. Maybe I will this next time. Normally if school get cancelled or it’s a half day I just babysit and I feel bad when people come get they kids with them stickers on, you know? I heard that like Michigan just gets

one vote for everybody, no matter what all the people vote. So I just feel like, do, does my vote mean that or, you know they gonna count them wrong, you know? And sometimes I see all the signs in people's yards that it's just too much to think about. Everybody got an opinion, but how they even know?

Christine's lack of voting history evoked feelings of regret. This regret was rationalized by the assumption that her individual vote wouldn't count anyway, due to her understanding of the electoral college. Neveah shared similar feelings of regret, primarily because she felt others judged her as disrespectful when she didn't vote. She also expressed the belief that the outcome of an election of particular interest was predetermined:

Neveah: I've never had an election, because you know when President Obama was elected I was too young. This time. This time I don't know. I don't want to tell you something I'm not gonna do. Sometimes other stuff comes up. I want to participate. Sometimes I feel like people wanna hate on you if you don't vote, if I'm not out there to do this then I don't care about my ancestors or something. But it's not like that. Last year my aunt was telling me that I could vote for the schools to have more money to take care of like retarded or handicapped kids. I was gonna do it, but then everybody say it's never gonna go because people won't pay taxes to take care of other people's kids. So then I was like if it's not even gonna pass why would I go out there?

Nick expressed no regret over not voting. He did, however, reiterate the themes of uncertainty and disconnect that Christine and Neveah's respective stories introduce in

this section. His uncertainty stemmed from the perceived clandestine nature of the tallying system. Feelings of disconnect were motivated by the process's lack of relevance to his system of priorities, which seemed to include concrete evidence of a daylong commitment.

Nick: My mom's boyfriend, he took me once and I was like seventeen. He voted for Obama. He got dressed up like a job interview or some, or something, so like I knew this was a thing like a big thing to him. Like Obama was just gon be there like "Thank you for your vote, sir. Thank you for your vote, sir." Yo, we stood there for like forever and he was just talking to all these people bout Dr. King and Nelson Mandela and they just I mean, they were so into it. I mean, I thought it was going to be all serious and shit, but it wasn't like that. I was so bored the whole time though man. They gon have to let me vote on the internet or something if I'm gon vote. You spend the whole day out there and you don't even know what they gon do with that little piece of paper, like a bubble test or some shit.

Nick's distrust for testing systems originated in elementary school, when his mother had to fight to keep him out of remedial courses because he performed poorly on a standardized test.

"And that right there, I mean, that let me know man you can't be just taking what they say at they word. So basically, I'm supposed to get... they say I'm supposed to get held back because I ain't pass that test. But when my moms shows up like, fuck that, I mean, she told them naw. She said naw because she knew I wasn't stupid though. And even now, even you know that I don't...I'm not...they will,

some people would try to say that I'm stupid. But she always knew, and you can't let nobody tell you different than what you already know. So like, with voting, I mean, I already know how that's gonna go down. You think when big businessmen or Osama bin Laden or some shit talk about who gonna be the next president they say "Oh we betta check and see what Nick think? You know what they gonna do?"

At that point, Nick whirled like a paper shredder. As he whirled, he raised his hand with his fingers pointing downward and pressed together. As he dropped his hand, he separated his fingers and dropped them limply on the table to simulate pieces of cut paper. His gesture underscored how watching his mother's boyfriend feed a ballot into the voting machine seemed ludicrous, because there was no way of knowing if that machine was a paper shredder or not. Stories of civic conspiracy, like Nick's voting machine/paper shredder hypothesis, were most pronounced in Kevin's narratives.

Kevin: I don't vote. I mean before I couldn't, now I don't. There's been different stuff that I knew I coulda voted on. And once, I drove by the place and just kept driving when all the people was out there. I thought about it, I mean I thought about it for real. I'm not registered. But I know what's up. That's some symbolic shit right there. You do that to make the people who went before you proud. Because I know that, when George Bush got elected, none of the Black votes counted. And if I stopped that day and I knew that if like the FBI or Illuminati or the KKK wasn't cool with my vote it would disappear. Boom. Maybe for the local stuff next time, I don't know who got the power around here.

Civic risk.

The theme of civic risk is reflective of these actual and perceived threats that accompany civic activity. It is comprised of the subthemes “*the dimensions of trust*”, detailing the dubious foundation on which civic relationships are predicated, and “*fatal fidelities*”, exploring the fear of incurring retributive physical, structural and ideological harm for participating in civic spaces. I chose a conversation with Neveah about her life to exemplify the dangers and distrust through which my co-researchers interpret the civic sphere. In this story, it is evident that the civic is seen as a retaliatory and vindictive space where challenging systems and authorities could result in long-term negative consequences. The economic stability of Neveah’s home life is somewhat fragile. Her mother generally earns enough to sustain them, but unexpected costs can “mess up the flow”. Neveah recently applied for food stamps in secret to help keep groceries in the cupboard. She nibbles on a yellow and black striped manicure as she wonders aloud about the extent to which her social, economic and political interests would be secure if she chose to join in a protest against brutality. Eventually, she laughed.

Neveah: No, not like that’s funny. I mean, I like do stuff. I’m really involved at my church and with like church activities, and I do Change.org at the library when I’m here. Um...I always do like the extra dollar or whatever when they need you to donate to Africa or for hunger or whatever. Yeah, but like I can’t be getting in to all that. Like protests and stuff. You know, you can like get arrested and then what? I can’t get a record. I’ve seen people’s mugshots at the gas station. I mean, so even if I don’t go to jail or something people still know I got arrested. I mean, I

babysit. Nobody wants to have they kids all up in somebody's house with warrants or on probation.

Researcher: So, you identify police brutality as a problem in your community. And you think that a march would be an effective means of responding to that problem. But the costs to you, the potential costs to you as an individual...

Neveah: What do I want changed? It's not going to get more jobs, or make the school not be... whatever. Protest for what? Like, for real? How that sound? For real? I'm going to get up in they face because they beat people up? They'd just beat me up, too.

In addition to her concerns about being arrested or assaulted, Neveah shared how she felt that her quality of life and the lives of those closest to her depended on her remaining civically inconspicuous. Compounding her fear of losing babysitting clients, Neveah worried that drawing attention to herself might also draw attention to her mother and sister. Her mother works as a legal aide in a lawyer's office. No lawyer would want an employee with a felon for a child. Her sister attends middle school in the township, which is outside of her legal district. Neveah was convinced that being arrested might result in negative consequences for her family's education and employment.

The dimensions of trust.

In the first focus group session, I encountered some resistance from my co-researchers in discussing the civic. As Dr. Dunbar had cautioned, they were extremely suspicious of my sudden presence and interest in their lives. They adopted the "appropriate cultural stance" of requisite skepticism to an authority figure asking too many questions (Dunbar, 2008, p. 89). Working through this "atmosphere of distrust"

was difficult (Achebe, 2002, p. 13), but we managed as I was able to prove I was not law enforcement, a social worker, or otherwise a representative of coercive institutional power. Once we established a measure of trust (which happened at a different point for each co-researcher), they began to communicate a lack of confidence in civic institutions. In addition to previously discussed perceptions that civic activity was ultimately ineffective, themes of civic mistrust developed in relation to their understandings of historical and contemporary disenfranchisement, negative or ineffective personal experiences with civic representatives or within civic spaces, and how they perceived themselves as unable to interpret and act on civic information. But in large part due to their feelings of civic inefficacy, direct inquiries on the subject didn't elicit much thick description:

Researcher: Why don't you trust politics?

Nick: You know, man. You already know. That stuff they be on? Naw, man.

Researcher: So what would make a politician trustworthy?

Nick: Nothing.

Researcher: Nothing at all?

Nick: Mmm mmm. Can't trust them dudes.

Researcher: You seem distrustful, maybe even angry at politicians. But you mentioned before you had a lot of respect for former Mayor Ham.

Kevin: I don't...I mean, these mother...politicians is ill, for real. Was she a politician? I think she's different, you know, cause she's like down or

whatever.

Researcher: So you don't trust politicians?

Kevin: I mean, you know, it's not even about trust like that. Because I don't know them and they don't know me, that's why.

Researcher: And you're not sure if Mayor Ham is a politician?

Kevin: Can you be a Black politician, though? I thought if you was Black we is civil rights leaders, see though?

Researcher: Why don't you trust politics?

Christine: I just don't, you know? Like, I just don't?

Researcher: What about politics don't you trust?

Christine: [shrugs]. Just nothing.

Researcher: But what is it about the political process that you don't trust?

Neveah: I wouldn't say I don't trust them. Just like, maybe I don't. Maybe, no I don't, you know? Because of everything we been through.

Researcher: What have we been through?

Neveah: You know, like, everything with slavery and voting and trying to just get whats ours in this country. So, like the political process has not really accomplished that.

We. Spoken in the right context, it can be the qualitative researcher's greatest reward. It means that one belongs, however loosely or temporarily, within a group with the interviewee. Show up on the wrong side of we, however, and your subjects might

have been ostracized you from the process of knowledge discovery. This is because we only extends membership to some because it simultaneously creates and perpetuates distance and distinction from others, those who are not members. Neveah used “we” to refer to me as a member of a group with her and others who had “been through” the same experience of slavery and disenfranchisement that would cause us to distrust the political process. As Kevin insinuated, we are the people who are cannot be generic politicians, because the specificity and burden of our racial struggle makes us civil rights leaders. One could argue that this understanding of “we” in the civic is challenged by Neveah categorizing President Obama with “other people like that, in Washington or whatever”. Or, one could consider that being we isn’t simply being Black. It’s something more.

Consider another research reward, in the form of “you know”. I recognize that “you know” often functions as a generic discourse marker, and doesn’t bear much interpretive value in transcriptions. But I argue here that “you know” in the above exchanges implied that I *do* know, that there is subtext of which I should be aware, or an experience that didn’t need to be retold because I was there when it happened in the first place. I am presumed to know that stuff that politicians be on. I am presumed to know what made Mayor Wilmer Jones-Ham, the first Black female mayor of Saginaw and mother of an NBA player, different from others who bore the title of politician. Getting to the point where they accepted that I might know involved both sides relinquishing any perceived power, embracing the vulnerability of intimate conversation, and emphasizing the commonalities of our shared social identities. As we succeeded in this process, I was presumed to know because my co-researchers recognized that we had:

similar lives experiences. Similar insights provide a window with which to share

views without speaking, where a sound, seemingly inaudible to the unprepared ear, speaks volumes to a knowing listener, where the expression on one's face tells the whole story or a simple nod says "I know where you're coming from."
(Dunbar, 2008, p. 90)

Black. When whispered within the American political context the word elicits alternating and varied feelings of guilt and pride, fear and anger, beauty and revulsion, power and invisibility. It depends on whom you're speaking with. But foundational to all of these feelings is the reality that "Black" distinguishes from "white", in ways with social, political and moral significance. It is more than a phenotypical distinction, as all of my co-researchers broadly share a phenotypical classification with President Obama. It is based on an unspoken expectation of an experiential Black ethos that contrasts the stuff Nick insists "*they* be on," the rhetoric of "*them dudes*" he can't trust, or the "*them*" that Kevin doesn't know. It was unclear, to Neveah at least, if and how President Obama embodied her understanding of this ethos. Demarcations between we and they were initially imposed on African and African descended people through capitalism, enslavement and apartheid. While sometimes impenetrable, there has never been one understanding of the role of and responses to these demarcations within the Black community. But their ongoing material and spiritual significance has been theorized to serve a social ontological function in Black political thought, based on the failure of the 1960s civil rights movement to produce any substantive change in education, employment and living conditions. As Cooke (2011) elaborates:

a Black hermeneutics of suspicion ensures both physical and psychic survival. In other words, it produces itself not as an aberration, but as a normal—indeed,

essential—cognitive system. We can conclude, then, that Black paranoia may, given a person's context, generate itself as a necessary component of his or her autopoietic function - the biologic survival of the individual as a healthy entity. (p. 613)

The we and they distinction serves an important protective and explanatory function for my co-researchers that suggests a powerful relationship between individual and historical collective civic identity. It represents the boundaries of trust, and how trust is extended to and associated with the behaviors of in-group members. Christine's interpretation of the Roe v. Wade ruling shows how Christine considers certain choices as appropriate within Black cultural traditions of womanhood, motherhood and struggle:

Christine: So you can talk about abortion, right? I guess I'm what you call against abortion, I don't think mothers should have abortions, because basically that is what birth control is for. So some doctors should do it, you know, abortions or whatever, in case of something terrible or of some horrible situation. Like I don't think that if some fool off the street rapes you then you should have to have his baby. But basically, otherwise than... otherwise than that um... Anyways, if you think about it, how did abortion even get to be something okay in the first place? Did you know? My pastor preached this awhile ago before the last election. Some judges said, some tiny group of people when you think about it, said okay. Let's make this legal, let's make this okay. And even though it's like the worst thing that could happen, that like people can just ignore basic common sense and then kill a baby whenever they want because they fail. And then we're just supposed to trust the other decisions this group says about how we're supposed to live our

lives? About what is right and what is wrong or not? I don't like them. So no, I don't trust them. Black women always raised they kids. And now, I even have friends who are just like oh bet I'mma just get an abortion. They make these rules and then it makes what we have worse. Our families or whatever, in our community. Where, cause surviving as a mom that's something my mom did. And it used to make us proud of that, but now, just do whatever you want and you don't have to have a struggle because you can just gon and get an abortion.

Christine interprets the historical pro-life stance of the Black community and the fact that "Black women always raised they kids" as a moral agenda that embraces Black motherhood. Struggle is also part of this moral agenda. This is not a new conceptualization of the hardships attendant to Black life, in fact, the political theology of Dr. King rested on positioning unmerited Black suffering as redemptive and espousing the value of transforming "suffering into a creative force" (King, 1977, p. 152). Abortion, for Christine, was not only wrong because she viewed it as the termination of human life. It was also wrong because it allowed Black women to casually opt out of the types of struggles central to her understanding of the Black community. The judges, together with the rest of the *them* identified by Kevin, Nick and Neveah, lacked the moral authority, knowledge and experience to govern their community. As a result, *they* shouldn't be trusted.

Fatal fidelities.

"They prolly listening right now."

Kevin was speaking of the FBI, of course. They were – potentially – listening to our conversation at that very moment. If we were to plot an assassination or plan a

terrorist attack, they would know. And they would kill us. He seemed genuinely concerned about my well being as he raised a cautious index finger to his lips. He often expressed that engaging Black disenfranchisement in any direct way could prove fatal. Kevin is obsessed with such life and death calculations. Even though he's nineteen, he religiously adheres to the curfew ordinance³ that prohibits minors under seventeen from being on public streets between the hours of 10:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. He constantly worries about racial profiling. He often ends stories with the refrain "...because I can't get shot" or "I can't go out like that". His recognizance of his "death-bound" subjectivity and the reality of gun violence in Saginaw control his social life in unimaginable ways (JanMohamed, 2005).

Kevin: Naw, man, naw, see I gave up on all that because I have a son now. You can't be doing stuff dangerous, I don't sell nothing, I don't ride dirty, I don't associate with felons, I basically just keep out of trouble. I don't get down like that anymore.

Kevin is being a bit disingenuous in his insistence that he avoids all trouble. He is undoubtedly concerned with his own and the welfare of his son, but he succumbs once or twice a month to the illicit call of smoking a blunt with friends or shoplifting at a department store with low security. A night in jail, however, is worth the potential of breaching the mundane. Risking his life or time for something less immediate is more complicated. Though he is fairly certain that mass protest would prove the most effective means of curbing police brutality in the city, the potential that such a protest would be met with lethal force prevents him from exploring the idea any further.

³ No minor under the age of 17 years shall loiter, idle, wander, stroll or play in or upon the public streets, highways, roads, alleys, parks, public buildings, places of amusement and entertainment, vacant lots or other unsupervised places, between the hours of 10:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. of the following day.

Kevin: Nothing's probably going to change, so why take that chance you know?

Like why take that one in a million chance that of millions of niggas who die everyday, somebody's gonna care if you live or die?

Researcher: You think any direct action – even non-violent direct action – would be met with violence? From the police?

During the eight seconds of silence that followed this exchange, Kevin stared at me rather intently. I think he was trying to discern if I'd posed the above question sincerely. He sat back in his chair and folded his hands over his chest.

Kevin: Yeah, yeah I do.

Researcher: Okay, so what's an alternate plan of action?

Kevin: I mean, I'm kind of like about I don't bother them motherfuckers, they don't bother me, you know? Like don't start no shit won't be no shit.

Researcher: But there's already shit. You've already identified the shit going on in this city.

Kevin: Yeah, I mean there is shit, for sho. But I'm talking about me personally, me and mines. There is nothing you can do about that. It is not a place to march on these streets because it's not about Black people anymore. It's about these niggas, and they will kill you, one nigga at a time. There is no Dr. King. If he was here he'd kill himself. What we gonna do march half us up to the South Side, then stop, let half march to the East Side then stop?

Researcher: That's not a concern with police brutality, Kevin, that's a concern with gang violence.

Kevin: Um, don't... you can break it down however, basically. Basically, you could say that the reason there is gangs is because there is police brutality, and it started good but now niggas got nothing to lose.

Kevin suggested that the power of the Black collective had been diminished by gang geographies, and the reality that residents from one area of the city faced considerable risk entering another area. He understood civic violence to include forms of violence and suppression from representatives of the government, such as police or probation officers. But it also included the threat of violence from any group that benefitted from the present civic order, like local gangs. Christine was similarly wary of institutional and extralegal violence. She told me that her rape was intended to silence and retaliate against her boyfriend, whom she identified as a rising leader in a gang I asked her not to name. She shared other stories of instances in which she knew that rape or the threat of rape was used as an intimidation tactic for women and men. To march against police brutality might incur hostility from law enforcement. But to march against gang violence or serve as witness to a crime, could prove just as if not more dangerous. "Not everybody can just cross the bridge and go home," Christine shrugged, referencing the presence of Black middle class and Saginaw Township based leadership in local civic demonstrations.

Christine and I spoke at length about the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. She had previously mentioned being a fan of Aretha Franklin, so I showed her a Youtube video of Mahalia Jackson singing "How I Got Over" at the Lincoln Memorial on my laptop and asked for her response. She was impressed, and we collectively pondered which contemporary singers might be selected if Dr. King were to host a

similar march today. After she decided on John Legend and Beyonce, she suggested, “We better pick some white music, too, because you know they’d have them up there.”

Her insistence that white people be involved in civic demonstrations didn’t reflect a commitment to multiracial coalitions, and extended beyond an interest in entertainment diversity. Our conversation led to her assessment of what it would take for the personal sacrifices of Black protestors to prove meaningful:

Christine: You know what? Dr. King, when you see pictures of him, he had all kinds of white friends. I know, because I be watching PBS sometimes. And I bet you got all kinds of white friends. Don’t you? Ashley?

Researcher: I work with a lot of white people. I go to school with them. I don’t know how many white friends I have.

Christine: You ever been with a white guy?

Researcher: No.

Christine: How come?

Researcher: What do you think?

Christine: I mean, you all about that Black stuff, huh? I see you. You could prolly get a white guy if you wanted. And not one of them homeless ass looking ones.

Like a really nice one...Because niggas will date any white girl they see but white men only date Black girls with degrees and shit. But I was even saying, you go out there all them white people you work with they are going to care that you got beat up in jail or something. They will call people, judges and stuff. The district attorney. But there ain’t no white people here.

“There ain’t no white people here.” Through this statement, Christine expressed that there is no one in her community deemed important enough to draw moral attention to the social injustices that she faces. This was one of the more difficult moments of my conversations with Christine. Our experiences with violence were very similar – we’d both survived abusive relationships, rape, and threatening stalking scenarios. But somehow, I was still socially valuable enough to attract a white partner because I had “a degree and shit”.

Nick would also insinuate that somehow my level of education made me different than others in the Black community. If he were to kill me, he suggested, it would definitely make the news. His death, on the other hand, would occur largely without notice. Nick shared with me that if he fell victim to the unjustified use of deadly police force, his initial post-mortem experience would be considerable local prominence. His face would be airbrushed onto t-shirts, and he could quite possibly have a spaghetti dinner fundraiser hosted in his name. But ultimately, everyone except for his family would forget he ever lived. Nick argued that no substantial changes would be brought about as a result of his death. I asked him about the legacy of Emmitt Till, a story with which he was unfamiliar. I told him the details.

Nick: I mean, he didn’t even do anything like what you talking about though. He was just being a kid, man. You know that’s what I’m saying, you could die any day. Any time. And it could be under real messed up circumstances, you know? But if just somebody on the street kill you, or the police kill you, or you kill yourself it don’t matter here. I didn’t know about what’s his name?

Researcher: Emmitt Till?

Nick: Yeah man, I didn't know about him. Maybe that's just something old folks know, man, I don't know. Old stories. But like him getting killed and you knowing about it didn't stop Trayvon Martin from getting shot. That's what it is you know?

The fruit of historical Black labor and sacrifices weren't immediately evident to Nick. Historically, the execution of Emmitt Till should have taught some lesson about the Black male body that would have prevented the death of Trayvon Martin.

Contemporarily, Nick's situation paralleled Orlando Patterson's (1982) conception of extrusive social death: he was "one who ceased to belong and had been expelled from normal participation in the community because of a failure to meet certain minimal legal or socioeconomic norms of behavior" (p. 41). Despite his skills as a poet, he could barely read. He had no job, and it was unlikely that he would gain entry into the formal labor market anytime soon. He regularly buried his friends. He once showed me a picture on his phone of a young Black man in a casket who'd died a few weeks before. A colored bandana was folded across the man's chest, symbolizing his gang affiliation.

Researcher: I'm sorry for your loss, Nick. Were you very close?

Nick: Naw, naw. Like, we went to school together. But not since I left, though, he left, too so...

Researcher: Do you mind if I ask how he died?

Nick: [makes a gun with his right hand and shoots it sideways]

Researcher: Do they know who did it?

Nick: Do they know who did it? Naw. But we did.

I didn't ask Nick to elaborate on the they-we distinction. I didn't ask why Nick phrased his knowledge of the shooter in the past tense. I didn't ask why his friend was shot, or his friend's name, or about the bandana. I changed the subject, and Nick nodded his approval. He leaned forward and raised his voice to communicate that he was okay with moving on. We'd both looked at a body in a casket on a smartphone screen, and the tone of our conversation had barely changed. I thought briefly about the biopolitics of Black disposability (Giroux H. , 2006), but excused my lack of immediate emotional response to the death of Nick's friend with the fact that I had enough insight to share how for Nick, getting caught up in a civil disturbance would be repeating a poorly conceived historical mistake.

Theorizing civic boredom and civic risk through the lens of CRT.

In Chapter 1, I reviewed six tenets of CRT: the systemic nature of racism or the permanence of racism in American society; the use of marginalized knowledge in challenging hegemonic frameworks; whiteness conceived as property; a critique of liberalism; intersectionality; and the commitment to social justice. These tenets can be used to elaborate on the themes of civic boredom and civic risk. In this section, I prioritize racism as endemic, whiteness as property and the critique of liberalism in exploring the multifaceted ways that race operates in the lived experiences of my co-researchers. Reflecting on civic boredom and *the politics of cultural affirmation*, my co-researchers articulated a civic value system derived from their experience, and predicated upon a particular performance of Blackness. This performance is one symbol through which my co-researchers frame and give meaning to themselves and other actors in the civic sphere. Nick's concern that the

performances he values are not accepted or acknowledged within the dominant civic sphere offers insight into how civic spaces are developed without reference to the needs and interests related to the cultural solidarity and identity of marginalized groups. Due to these types of exclusion, the power to dictate the etiquette for political participation, specifically etiquette concerning the characteristics that should serve as a marker of civic credibility, can be viewed as a form of property. This is one way in which whiteness defines “the structure of social relations along the entire spectrum of interaction between the individual and society” (Harris C. , 1993, p. 1745). Extending the metaphor of property and the concept of political etiquette, it can be argued that whoever owns the table gets to determine who is served, which foods are served, and the appropriate customs for dining. As evidenced in their stories of early civic experiences, the criteria for this performance of Blackness was developed throughout childhood in reference to media, various cultural practices, and the political musings of adults in their lives. My co-researchers were able to identify the sources of their expectations, and to articulate feelings of disappointment, frustration and confusion when these expectations weren’t met.

It is likely, in fact almost certain, that all civic actors cope with such feelings. But all feelings of civic dissociation are not necessarily rooted in disempowerment. My co-researchers express personal feelings that can also be identified as symptoms of institutional relationships that disproportionately disempower the Black and the poor as social groups. For example, *feeling* as if no one listens to you in civic life is distinct from encountering social and structural repression of your voice and interests in civic life. It is

thus necessary to distinguish between holding an unpopular or unsupported opinion and possessing marginalized knowledge. Referring to the knowledge and experiences of my co-researchers as marginalized is conceptually beneficial because of the implications for both intersecting race and class-based oppression. Marion Young (1990) defines marginalization as “systemic constraint that expels people from or immobilizes people within participation in social life”. Marginalization encompasses forms of material deprivation and restriction that block “the opportunity to exercise capacities in socially defined and recognized ways” (p. 41). In addition to the objective perils of poverty, Young (1990) highlights the subjective effects of lack of recognition:

Injustices of marginality would remain in the form of uselessness, boredom and lack of self-respect. Most of our society’s productive and recognized activities take place in contexts of organized social cooperation, and social structures and processes that close persons out of such social cooperation are unjust. Thus, while marginalization definitely entails serious issues of distributive justice, it also involves the deprivation of cultural, practical and institutionalized conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction. (p. 42)

Marginalization undermines one’s ability to meaningfully contribute to systems of social cooperation. Further, it deprives one of the capacities to interact in the civic sphere in recognized and self-affirming ways. When Nick observes that President Obama talks like a white dude, he offers more than a commentary on speech patterns. He questions the extent to which political power is offered at the expense of valued aspects of racial identity, and reflects on his own marginalized, voiceless and powerless position. This corresponds with the critique that racial autonomy,

and any attendant performances of an autonomous racial identity, are irreconcilable with the liberal political project (Clarke, 1989).

Instead, race can only be performed in superficial and uncontroversial ways (Clarke, 1989; Talisse, 2006). As Curry (2009) argues:

racial identification...becomes difficult when it is abstracted from reality so that it may be strategically used as a weapon in the interplay between Black people's experience of racism at the hands of whites and the enforcement of a certain type of ethics which define the proper ways by which Black discontent can be expressed philosophically without stigmatization. (p. 8)

Proper racial performances and forms of racial resistance are grounded in individualism and personal progress, rather than historical and shared structural vulnerabilities. This abstraction from reality is evident in Christine's story, in which historical memories of collective struggle contrasted with the reality of informality and individualism in the contemporary march. Such strategies have lost meaning for many in Saginaw, causing Christine to question the march's importance and effectiveness. Her experience, together with Kevin's argument that historical responses are inadequate in light of contemporary injustice, also issues a challenge to the liberal representation of the Black freedom struggle as an aggregate of Black individuals on a linear march "almost without detour to freedom and equality" (Harris R. L., 1982, p. 110). The conceptualization of struggle as a gradual sojourn toward inevitable racial transcendence imposes certain constraints on the strategies of resistance deemed appropriate within the liberal narrative. These constraints include the threat of majority sanction against

minority groups who adopt inappropriate political strategies, with appropriateness encompassing liberal notions of moral soundness and viability. Morally sound and viable strategies must function within the rule of law, toward the objective of colorblindness, and in respect of the capitalist paradigm (Clarke, 1989). Such strategies are heralded as democratic exemplars in the liberal tradition even when deemed ineffective by those participating within the struggle.

Confronted with liberal confinement, my co-researchers wonder if and how civic effort will be rewarded. This uncertainty, combined with historical memories of political suppression and disenfranchisement helped to shape the theme of *evaluating uncertain investments*. Christine's understanding of the electoral college to disenfranchise individual voters, Neveah's belief that the levy had already been lost, Nick's symbolic reduction of the ballot to confetti, and Kevin's belief that external secret forces would discount his vote support this theme. The weight of historical oppression and civic uncertainty, expressed by Kevin in reference to mysterious forces of the Federal Bureau of Investigations, the Illuminati or the Ku Klux Klan, have been theorized to shape Black political behavior (Waters, 1997). Suspicion of the voting process was present across each of my co-researchers stories, and this suspicion seemed to breed apathy and alienation. Just as Christine longed for more passion for a collective agenda in Saginaw's civic space, one common theme across these stories is the idea that the individual voter doesn't amount to much in the civic story. In addition to inadequate strategies of resistance, my co-researchers' understanding of voting in suggests that they consider available strategies of integration inadequate as well. This corresponds to the CRT analysis of voting and legal systems within a liberal democracy. For example, Tate

(1997) builds on CRT's analytical roots in the field of law to discuss how votes that disempower numerical minority groups broadly and Black people specifically can be included on a ballot, approved by the majority, and upheld in the justice system through the use of social pseudo-science and flawed empirical data. My co-researchers insinuated that even if they and every other Black citizen were to vote, they collectively lack the resources to determine the issues or engage in the debates that shape public policy on issues of racial disempowerment. Bell (1980) argues further that "the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites," and that no strategy of political resistance will ever be accepted by the majority that potentially "threatens the superior societal status of middle and upper class whites" (p. 523). Nick supported this line of thinking in his argument that "big businessmen" and other stakeholders, including Osama bin Laden, would silence his vote if it conflicted with their social agenda. This assumption that racism as a form of inequity is a permanent fixture of the civic sphere further aligns with the tenets of CRT. Nick, Christine, Kevin and Neveah's respective awareness of at least some political figures and issues is evident at various points throughout each of their stories. This awareness and any subsequent intent are suppressed by suspicion, hesitation and despair that ultimately result in feelings of indifference and a sense of powerlessness.

In Chapter 3, I discussed how trust is developed and extended within cultural contexts. This discussion, as implied through the subtheme of *the politics of cultural affirmation*, is immediately applicable to civic relationships. The *dimensions of trust* in the civic sphere for my co-researchers are illuminated through their continued use of the us/them distinction. Consistent across their accounts was distrust of civic systems,

particularly as it relates to expectations of protection and struggle. My co-researchers did not feel that governing authorities could or desired to shield them from harm, especially if they engaged in acts of resistance. They conceptualized their bodies as civic bargaining chips, part of an exchange in which the well-controlled or unnoticeable body may be sufficient payment for some measure of safety. This was evident in the narratives used to develop this theme: Neveah's body and behavior are tied to the fate of her family; Kevin's life depends on avoiding FBI surveillance and police harassment; Christine tries to disappear to escape rape as a weapon of gang warfare; and Nick's acceptance that his lifestyle and death-style might parallel that of Emmitt Till, Trayvon Martin and his murdered friend. I argue that the reality of violence for my co-researchers is enough to support the argument for a distinct civic *ethnosociology*, or theory employed by ordinary people use to explain social phenomena (Waters, 1997, p. 114). The specific constraints imposed by social stratification on my co-researchers' doing and being has informed similar ideological responses to the commonly experienced conditions of life. In order to process my interview questions, local news headlines, and lived experiences with death, my co-researchers have to fit the variables of their body, civic promises, and the threat of violence into an ethnosociological theory of civic life. If they sufficiently control their bodies, there is the potential of safety. If they fail to control their bodies, they recognize the disposability of their bodies as civic instruments, and the potential costs of civic activity. The cumulative effect of these recognitions, together with the ongoing social disturbances and everyday traumas, render the civic a risky and untrustworthy space. Their distrust is a necessary consideration because social trust is a cornerstone of the liberal system (Williams, 2000).

Williams argues that “by definition, marginalized ascriptive groups stand in an uncertain relationship to other citizens, one in which they can have little confidence that others take an interest in their well-being” (p. 149). CRT scholarship has developed accounts of this distrust at length, arguing against placing trust in dominant systems and articulating through the principle of interest convergence that the only racial advances allowed by dominant groups are those that coincide with dominant interests (Bell, 1995; Delgado, 2001). This is reflected in Kevin’s insistence that responding to gang violence is not a concern of white people in Saginaw, Christine’s attempt to design a contemporary march placated to the interests of potential white allies, and Nick’s belief that violence against the Black male body by racists will continue to occur despite historical and contemporary outrage. The concept of a common good that might include Black and white citizens is nonexistent in their community. Attempting to articulate an agenda that advances Black interests but entreats on white privilege might even prove fatal. The theme of *fatal fidelities* was developed in reference to Dorothy Roberts (1997) piece “The Meaning of Blacks’ Fidelity to the Constitution”. Analyzing the historical support of constitutional principles in Black rhetoric, Roberts suggests interpreting Black people’s fidelity to the Constitution not as a duty, but as a “demand to be counted as full members of the political community” (p. 1762). The role of the Constitution in the Black liberation struggle is not a reflection of abiding commitment or loyalty, then, but reflective of the principle of interest convergence. For example, Black free speech is protected only to the extent that white free speech must also be protected. An acknowledgement of this was an additional feature of my co-researchers’ ethnosociology, evidenced in Kevin, Christine and Nick’s respective understandings that only white life is

valuable. As a result, only white life is supported, protected, mourned and avenged. Black life, in contrast, is often the currency by which civic progress is paid for. But as demonstrated, my co-researchers seem aware that making a demand to full membership within a system that devalues Black life could prove to be a death sentence. There is no trust, there is no expectation of reciprocity, and there is no expectation that dominant representatives will act in good faith.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion.

I began this study describing my commitment to naming and working to improve the conditions confronted by my co-researchers in their civic lives. The process and context of naming has been described throughout the dissertation. As a closing reflection, I reiterate the argument that the meaning embedded in my co-researchers lived experiences of civic disempowerment can be used to expose and challenge dominant definitions and understandings of civic empowerment and disempowerment (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The purpose of this chapter is to further position the themes of civic boredom and civic risk within the philosophy of racial realism, and to offer concluding thoughts on the significance of this study for conceptualizing civic empowerment. In support of this purpose, I summarize the findings of the study, articulate the need for situating these findings within a racial realist external critique, and to offer a racial realist definition of civic empowerment.

Summary of findings.

Despite growing interest in Black civic engagement and empowerment, the lived experiences of Black youth have been ignored and under theorized. In recognition of this gap, the present study sought to respond to two research questions: *What meanings do Black youth attribute to the lived experience of civic disempowerment?* and *What social and institutional processes inform these meanings?* The resulting inquiry and interpretation were guided by the tenets of CRT. A review of the literature suggested that my co-researchers experience civic disempowerment, undergirded by liberalism and the new colorblind racism, in unique ways. The themes of civic boredom and civic risk,

developed through phenomenological focus group and individual interviews, served as overarching themes to represent the lived experiences, and provide insight into the objectives of the research study. As evidenced through the data analysis, my co-researchers' narratives of civic disempowerment bore notable correspondence to the tenets of CRT. This occurred in anticipated ways, by affirming the endemic nature of racism and extending the critique of liberalism, for example. They also provided a descriptive account of the social conditions that racial realism works to describe, and how previous commitments to racial equality serve to perpetuate Black disempowerment (Bell, 1992b). Their stories supported the conclusion that abstract legal rights have not produced a culturally, socially or emotionally relevant civic sphere; provided paths to collective and individual efficacy and enhancement; offered actual or perceived safety and security; or facilitated relationships of trust in civic spaces. This insight enabled me to better theorize civic disempowerment, and to begin to formulate what civic empowerment might mean in the lives of my co-researchers.

Theoretical implications: the need for external critique.

My co-researchers' stories of lived experience supported and extended the tenets of CRT, the philosophy of racial realism, and the collaborative rejection of liberalism, concern with addressing material conditions, and contention that racial equality is not an attainable or desirable goal. It is unlikely that educators, who must function within and as instruments of the dominant system, will be able to adopt and apply such a perspective in their practice. This is likely why racial realism does not figure prominently in Gloria Ladson Billing's (2003) edited volume, Critical Race Theory Perspectives on the Social Studies: The Profession, Policies, and Curriculum. But I maintain and recommend that

educators and scholars should assess the extent to which racial realist narratives contribute to developing meaningful and social justice oriented pedagogy and curriculum. My co-researchers felt empowered simply by coming to voice, by using the space we shared to reflect on their conditions in ways they hadn't before. It mattered that I listened. This corresponded to one function of the counter-story, wherein "new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36). The research also served an additional function of the counter-story, articulating a challenge to the "perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems" (p. 36). My co-researchers stories allow the reader to envision a radical alternative, that might at least be able to inspire "policy positions and campaigns that are less likely to worsen conditions for those we are trying to help, and will be more likely to remind those in power that there are imaginative, unabashed risk-takers who refuse to be trampled upon" (Bell, 1992b, p. 378). Stories like these are necessary because the internal inconsistencies of liberalism are not easily revealed to those within the dominant group.

As a result, an external critique is necessary. As introduced in Chapter 1, external critique "effects its interrogation by measuring a view's claims and/or categories against some pre-given conceptual yardstick, i.e., against some truth criterion presupposed as valid in advance" (Gunn, 1989, p. 98). Gunn argues that by refusing to engage in the "long painful and severe" conversations of compromise, external critiques fail to proceed in good faith, or to justify how the presupposed truth criterion are appropriate and effective terms of deliberation (p. 14). Recognizing whiteness as property, the inadequacy

of colorblindness, and the suppression of marginalized knowledge, however, it could be argued that any critique rooted in the lived experience of Blackness is necessarily external, as Blackness has been positioned by dominant forces as “outside of the concerns of philosophical thought and investigation” (McClendon, 2005, p. 284). The meaningless, dangerous space that my co-researchers inhabit and describe is fundamentally incompatible with and external to the ideology of the level playing field that liberalism purports to sustain. An external critique is also important because through the new colorblind racism, liberalism advances internal justification for continued oppression and isolation and disempowerment. This justification is articulated through the myth of meritocracy and methodological individualism, as well as through the philosophy of colorblindness. In civic life and in all forms of racial struggle, one who insists that they are colorblind cannot combat the problem of the color line. An external critique derived from the lived experiences of my co-researchers insist that racism be afforded descriptive and explanatory primacy in identifying and navigating disenfranchisement in their lives. As a result, I argue that it is important to consider racial realism as it manifests in my co-researchers lived experiences as a strategically and intentionally external critique.

Develop a racial realist conception of empowerment.

I’ve used this space to describe the meanings I attribute to my experiences in Saginaw, and some of the institutional and social processes that inform these meanings. I hope to have demonstrated how the boundaries of my being, framed by my temperament, personal experiences, research commitments, race, gender, social position and existence within a liberal democracy contribute to my erasure from historical and civic consideration. I also hope to illuminate the sadness, horror, fear, confusion and shock that

accompany civic disempowerment in a way that renders it visible, situates it in its appropriate place, to recognize and begin to affirm it in its completeness. The process of naming something is not an individualistic act. I don't name it on my own behalf, but to advance a collective struggle. Being Black and attempting to exist within the boundaries of normal is to be disempowered. Any analysis of disempowerment that intends to alleviate Black civic disempowerment will necessarily disrupt discourses of normalcy. This dissertation is my attempt to narrate one such disruption, to convey the lived experiences of Black youth in such a way that what is accepted as normal is called into question.

One such way is by developing a racial realist conception of civic empowerment. Arriving at racial realist conceptualizations of the social forces and relationships that undergird systems of disempowerment is an important theoretical and practical task. Hill-Collins (2000) argues that because “social justice projects need a common, functional vocabulary that furthers their understanding of the politics of empowerment” (p. 275). Scholars in the critical race tradition have worked to reveal how dominant narratives of objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality and equal opportunity legitimate “the notion of ‘race’, monolithic racial identities and the black ‘other’;” and employed CRT to “effectively to generate a useful theoretical vocabulary” that illuminates and challenges the “essential formations of racial power and ideologies” (Hylton, 2005, p. 84; 94). Within the context of the *hip-hop millenials*, it has been argued that CRT is a viable framework for elucidating contemporary racial phenomena, expanding the vocabulary with which to discuss complex racial concepts, and challenging racial hierarchies (Ford

& Airhihenbuwa, 2010). As such, a racial realist definition of civic empowerment accounts for the necessity of self-definition while making explicit the need to act.

In Chapter 6, I offered initial insight into what CRT empowerment looks like. I argued that empowerment encompasses a sense of shared struggle, awareness of social position and strategies of resistance, and the capacity for self-defense. It entails “people collectively working to change their lives” (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999, p. 6), and “the deliberate promotion of gender, racial, and social class equality” (Baber, 2003, p. 56). Here, I extend Eliasoph’s (1998) argument on public discourse to suggest that empowerment reveals the “natural and unmovable” aspects of civic life to be “humanly created and changeable” (p. 17). This revelation will not come through integration or racial transcendence. True empowerment would facilitate my co-researchers ability to identify the source of their civic boredom and civic risk, to depersonalize the implications of their conditions, and to recognize that while these may be normal and permanent features of their civic lives, this form of disempowerment is not justifiable or right. I define empowerment broadly because the most essential criteria of this conceptualization is that it allows space for my co-researchers to define empowerment on their own terms and within their own context, rather than accept an empowerment premised on the liberal ideal of citizenship and motivated toward integration into liberal political struggles. This might facilitate an empowerment congruent with their cultural expectations, an empowerment that enhances efficacy, and empowerment that facilitates trust, and an empowerment that situates violence and the threat of violence within it’s – this does not suggest they should work to eliminate violence, rather, to act violently or to incite violence is a civic choice, not a consequence of simply being. Or, to borrow from

Tommy Curry (2012), their resistance must reside in their struggle and the reality birthed from it. Empowerment is the ability to accurately assess the terms and articulate outcomes of struggle.

For Christine, empowerment came through founding and leading a community organization designed to support women whose partners were incarcerated. Neveah chose to enroll in the army to finish school and become a nurse. For Nick and Kevin, the search for empowerment was premised on developing agency and securing enough resources to determine the outcome of their own lives. The reality of their disempowerment, in some ways, served as a form of empowerment. In alignment with Bell's (YEAR?) objective of fulfillment and triumph:

a politics of disempowerment finds its realization in the conscious struggle against the daily institutional practices and rationalizations that justify both the gradualism of American race relations and the discursive etiquette that distracts Black scholars from dealing with the actual expressions of white superiority in all spheres of American society. (p. 11)

Recognizing the permanence of relationships of exploitation and marginalization, my co-researchers worked to define spaces in which they felt human. They recognize racism as normal, but refused to *be* normal - or, to embody the ambitions and behaviors of the appropriate liberal subject.

Final thoughts.

Liberal ideology has not provided a civic system that promises access and dignity to all who are present, or even to all who wish to participate. It is possible that such a system does not exist. The failures of these systems cannot be understood without

reference to the social and economic forces that they are intended to serve. In the United States, these forces include inequitable racial hierarchies and the unequal distribution of material resources. Some continue to argue that the civic has no determinate content, and that its principles and practices can be applied to produce meaningful, integrated, multicultural spaces. But these principals and practices were never neutral, they were always intended to space was created to govern the distribution of rights and duties, afford some status and power, and reproduce the knowledge and values necessary to advance white culture. I agree with Bakare that pain constrains civic subjectivity, and that healing is required. If critical race scholarship is correct, we will heal ourselves by reclaiming our humanity on our own terms. A CRT politics of disempowerment is not the same as not giving a fuck. It is the moral and political decision to define Black humanity without reference to the liberal paradigm. This definition occurs through themes that are not new to liberation literature – economic autonomy, cultural affirmation, safety, humanity. Focusing on these themes, rather than attempting to develop a model of good citizenship, is a radical and viable alternative. Christine took my suggestion and attempted to find support services after her boyfriend was imprisoned. A group at a white church rejected her. Christine chose to begin a prison wives’ support group in her community. She identified a problem, and worked to solve it. In the basement of a church, she became engaged, she became empowered. When I caught up with her later, she insisted that she had been inspired through our conversations to believe that she could make changes in her neighborhood:

Christine: Because there’s always gonna be white people, like you can’t do anything with that and probably, there’s always going to be poor. They ain’t

worried about us, you know. But I just figured if I was hurting like you said then [the other prison wives] was probably hurting, too. And if we don't try to be up in somebody's face about getting into they group, we could just use that time to like have a group for ourselves. Maybe we can hurt a little less, or heal some. Cause if we stronger, then our sons won't end up in prison and the next generation's womens can pick a new thing to do about what we have power over.

Extending that power, defining our problems, and working to solve them in ways that reject the paradigm of integration. While disengagement and racial realist civic empowerment are admittedly not concepts that all will embrace or adopt, I hope it inspires a shift from paradigms of social integration to one of social justice.

Conclusion.

This study provided me an opportunity to explore the lived experiences of four incredible young people in an effort to gain greater insight into the phenomenon of civic disempowerment. I was also able to assess if and how lived experiences of the civic, specifically narratives of disempowerment, correspond to the tenets of critical race theory (CRT) (Bell, 1992a; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006). Significant conceptual overlap was found between their stories of lived experience and the CRT framework, so that each source of knowledge was mutually enriched and advanced through reference to the other. Notably, their stories challenge liberal complacency with the presumed adequacy and representative universality of conceptions of the civic, critiquing embedded philosophies of the nature of racism, the value of marginalized knowledge, and the role of social and material property in determining civic outcomes. Their stories also highlight the need for the construction of a civic in which my co-

researchers can “imagine and implement racial strategies” that promote individual and collective fulfillment and triumph (Bell, 1992b, p. 374). Last, their stories suggest that civic empowerment is more adequately and effectively represented as a structural reality predicated on power relations, not as a primarily perceptual phenomenon. This representation is especially useful for social studies educators, who “must help call into question the role that race plays in helping or enabling citizens to experience democracy in its fullest manifestations” (Howard, 2003, p. 35). The stories of my co-researchers serve as a corrective to the ways in which educators have ignored how race as a social category continues to shape American life.

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