

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: RE-VISIONING VIOLENCE: HOW BLACK YOUTH ADVANCE CRITICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF VIOLENCE IN CLIMATES OF CRIMINALIZATION

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While Black youth are often framed as the perpetrators of violence in the mainstream media and other sites, they are rarely consulted for their views on violence. This dissertation examines how Black youth and other young people of color have used hip hop music and community organizing to publicly articulate their analysis of violence and shape public discourses, ideologies and policies. The project is principally framed by Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory, and uses discourse analysis, cultural criticism, and historical analysis as its primary methods of analysis. I examine hip hop lyrics and materials produced during community organizing campaigns, alongside a range of sources that reflect dominant frameworks on youth and violence such as laws, television programs, and sociological scholarship. This study argues firstly, that there is a discourse of “youth violence”; secondly, that this discourse is central to the criminalization of young people of color; and thirdly, that criminalization facilitates epistemic violence, harm and injury that results from the production of hegemonic knowledge. Finally, I draw on youths’

perspectives and social change practices to theorize the concept of epistemic resistance, and argue that youth have engaged in epistemic resistance – by using hip hop music to redefine what counts as violence, who is involved in violence, and why violence among youth occurs; conducting participatory action research projects to influence and change the content of mainstream media; and developing and promoting the discourse of a “war on youth” in organizing campaigns that challenge punitive policy proposals introduced as solutions to “youth violence.” This dissertation provides a re-theorized framing of and knowledge about the intellect and agency of marginalized youth. It also provides youth studies scholars with conceptual and methodological approaches for future scholarship on youth, violence, and safety. Lastly, this dissertation informs urban youth policy and grassroots organizing for transformative justice, a vision and practice of attaining safety and justice through personal and social transformation, rather than reliance on the criminal legal system.

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UNDERSTANDINGS OF VIOLENCE IN CLIMATES OF CRIMINALIZATION

By

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## Preface

On a Saturday afternoon in February 2008, five young people, ages 10 to 17, sat with me in the front room of a row house converted into an office space for youth organizers. Located on Martin Luther King Avenue Southeast, Washington, D.C., the office is just a few blocks away from the Anacostia metro station, the Barry Farms housing project, and the small bridge where you can stand between the two and see the Washington Monument on the other side of the city. We were meeting every Saturday as part of the Visions to Peace Project, a project I launched in 2007 to support youth-led activism and organizing for safety and peace. Our first program, the “Flip the Script! Media Arts Workshop,” provided a small team of Black youth, ages 13 to 18, with an opportunity to develop and share their ideas about violence through producing a documentary film. Weekly meetings were dedicated to learning documentary film production, while our Saturday sessions focused on developing a collective analysis of violence and working on creative writing and performance.

On that Saturday, only half of the team showed up – a boy, age 16, and a girl, age 14. I had recruited both of them from an evening reporting center in the neighborhood, an alternative-to-detention program for youth. Fortunately, they also brought a cousin, younger brother, and younger brother’s friend along with them. “What kinds of violence affect your life and the lives of other youth you know?” I asked the five youth seated in the small fluorescent-lit room. “Gun violence!....Domestic violence!....Police harassment!,” they called out one by one. I stood next to a large easel with chart paper, black marker in hand, so that I could quickly record their responses. After just a few minutes of brainstorming, our paper

was filled with words. The final list ranged from shootings and rape to closing down the projects and jail. They also pointed out the complexities of different kinds of violence. For example, they named and separated “school violence” into violence between students, violence by teachers and staff against students, and violence against students by security guards. Similarly, they subdivided domestic violence into violence between parents, violence by parents against children, and violence between siblings. These are all kinds of violence that youth experience, according to the young people in the room that day.

We also developed our analysis of violence by sharing and collecting stories. In our workshops, interviews, and in conversations and writings; in front of the camera, behind the camera, and when the camera was off – we shared our own experiences and interviewed other youth and adults. From the shock of a boyfriend’s punch to routine bullying by police officers, many of the stories that we heard and shared – and decided to include in our film – revealed forms and sources of violence against youth rarely featured in the mainstream media. The stories featured in the film we created also highlighted youths’ efforts to create safety for themselves and their communities. For example, a young woman talked about her decision to end a relationship after her boyfriend hit her for the first time while another teenager discussed his involvement in a campaign against police harassment and brutality of youth. The film also included original poetry by a young woman we interviewed and footage of my participation in panel discussions on criminalization and incarceration. The film that we created put the experiences and insights of Black youth at the center

of debates on violence and what can be done to end it. We decided to call the film *Vision Is Our Power*.

Whereas the dominant discourse of “youth violence” frames violence by youth as the central threat to young people’s safety, the film we produced reveals multiple faces of violence against youth. The film demonstrates that when Black youth are not only seen but also heard in debates and conversations on violence, they uncover forms, sources and intersections of harm and injury rarely discussed on news accounts, academic studies, or organizational campaigns on “youth violence.” They also draw attention to the need for language, discourses and frameworks that do not discursively reinforce the criminalization and incarceration of Black youth and other youth of color.

## Dedication

For my prayer warrior mother  
who is brilliant and forgiving  
You taught me my earliest lessons  
on violence, resistance, and healing

And for  
Nahdia, Micah, and Malachi,  
my beloved niece and nephews,  
that you may grow and blossom  
Unfettered



## Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge the person who has been with me as I wrote every word of this dissertation. This person is Jesus Christ, my ever present help.

Secondly, I acknowledge the members of my dissertation committee: Nancy Struna, Clyde Woods, Mary Sies, Christina Hanhardt, and Lynn Bolles. I was fortunate to have an entire committee of exceptional scholars whose work provides examples of the many different ways that academic scholarship can contribute to social change. My co-chairs Nancy Struna and Clyde Woods have been incredibly generous in their support and advising. Clyde Woods has been a constant cheerleader who kept me in the game when I came close to throwing in the towel. He is also the first person, as far as I can recall, who told me that I am a visionary. Nancy Struna held my research accountable to the work that I want it to do in the world. Mary Sies' support for all of my research interests helped me to find ways to bring them together. Christina Hanhardt's commitments and values often functioned as a steering wheel that kept my work from moving in too many directions, and replicating the kind of scholarship that I hope my work will challenge. Lynn Bolles directed me to a legacy of Black women who are simultaneously scholars, artists, cultural workers, and community activists. Knowing about this legacy gave me roots and hope. I also want to thank my outside reader and mentor Jessica Gordon Nembhard whose insights have immensely contributed to my development as an interdisciplinary scholar.

I am also especially grateful for resources, support and motivation from my family – including my mom and grandma's provision of a generous Dissertation Fellowship (i.e. free room and board in their home while writing my dissertation).

My grandma also helped to push my writing along by asking at every available opportunity, “What page are you on, now?” (Smile). I also appreciate Dana, Aaron, and Dad for their encouragement and motivation over the course of many years. In giving utmost thanks to my family, I am fortunate to count the members of New Covenant Church as well as my friends who have become kin in many ways, including my prayer partner, Yevonnie Lowe, who literally helped to pray me to the finish line. Thank you also to my Promise family – the faculty, staff and participants of the Promise (AGEP) Program. A special thank you to Renetta Tull and Johnetta Davis for the mountain-side retreats and Dissertation Houses. I also greatly appreciate Dr. Skip for his generous provision of a beach-front house for dissertation-writing getaways and Asha Lateef-Williams for sharing such a bounty with me.

The members of Writing Violence and Resistance have been a tremendous component of my intellectual life, as well as a great source of sisterhood. Thank you Aisha Finch, Tamara Walker, Jessica Johnson, Tanji Gilliam, Jennifer Bacon, and the many other fierce participants of our hot girl grad group. Many social justice organizations also inspired and nurtured this project in various ways particularly Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, and Building Leadership, Organizing Communities (BLOC – D.C.). Thank you also to the organizations lifting up a vision of transformative justice. I have learned much of what I share here from you. Finally, an extra heaping of gratitude to the youth and adults who have been involved in and contributed to the Visions to Peace Project. And to so many more who remain unnamed, I thank you from my heart and soul.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Today scholars know more than they ever have about the subtleties of domination, about the intersections of the modern systems that organize the production, reproduction, and distribution of social life, about the edifice of constructions upon which culture sings and weeps, about the memories and the overflowing accounts of the dismembered and the unaccounted for. Yet our country's major institutions – the corporation, the law, the state, the media, the public—recognize narrower and narrower evidence for the harms and indignities that citizens and residents experience. The most obvious violations – the poverty, the gaping inequalities of resources, the brutality of the police, the corruption of democratic politics, the hunger and homelessness, the hateful beatings and batterings – are everywhere to be seen only in the disappearing hypervisibility of their fascinating anomalousness.

- Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*<sup>1</sup>

To re-vision means to see anew, to move from one way of seeing to another. It can also mean to revise in order to envision, or to discard an old agenda in order to formulate a new one.<sup>2</sup> Re-visioning involves commitments to challenge and resolve; to critique and to create. This project is about re-visioning frameworks on youth and violence – models of conceptualizing violence that impact young people, and systems for communicating about violence in relation to youth. In the process, this project also re-visions models of constructing new analysis and discourses. Because we often see through the words we wrap around reality, re-visioning requires new language. Our first language lesson: This project is not about “youth violence.” It is about violence against youth. The term, “youth violence,” both denotes and connotes violence by youth and/or violence between youth. However, as the story in the Preface pointed out, young people are not only harmed by other young people, but

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<sup>1</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Adele E. Clarke and Virginia L. Olesen, “Revising, Diffracting, Acting,” in *Revisioning Women, Health and Healing* ed. Adele E. Clark and Virginia L. Oleson (New York: Routledge, 1999).

also by adults and institutions.<sup>3</sup> I use the term, “violence against youth” to refer to the many forms of harm and injury against young people – whether the violence is committed by youth, adults or institutions and whether it is the result of carelessness or the intent to harm. The phrase, violence against youth, is one of many “‘sensitizing concepts’ featured in this study – ideas to guide us toward fresh ideas and understandings ...working concepts, pragmatically flexible to allow multipurpose use.”<sup>4</sup>

Re-visioning also entails both theory and practice – developing new perspectives through experience and action; drawing from experience and action to see anew. I introduced this work with a snapshot of youth involved in a cultural activism and organizing project – not because they or their work is the focus of this dissertation – but because this story illustrates the development of collective analysis through cultural activism and youth organizing. This story highlights how much of the analysis presented in this work came from grassroots, participatory, and intergenerational processes – blurring the distinctions between the individual mode of analysis centered in academia and collective modes of theorizing prioritized in community organizing. This project would not exist without the insights afforded through engagement in grassroots struggles alongside years of scholarly study.

While involved in organizations working for the empowerment of communities of color (Blackout Arts Collective), a more fair and effective juvenile

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<sup>3</sup> Youth are also hurt by labels that position them as either victims or perpetrators. I avoid these terms as much as possible. As one alternative, I situate youth as the subject and employ the passive voice (for e.g. writing that “youth harmed by adults, institutions and systems...” rather than “youth are victims of adults, institutions and systems...”)

<sup>4</sup> Adele E. Clarke and Virginia L. Olesen, “Revising, Diffracting, Acting,” in *Revisioning Women, Health and Healing* ed. Adele E. Clark and Virginia L. Oleson (New York: Routledge, 1999), 5.

justice system (Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition) and an end to all forms of violence against women of color (Incite! Women of Color Against Violence), I learned about the existence of a prison-industrial complex, was introduced to youth-led community organizing, and joined a growing movement of people holding up a vision for prison abolition and community safety. I became increasingly committed to the principles that those most impacted by systems must be at the forefront of changing them, that critical theory is the steering wheel of social change, and that arts and culture are central to theoretical analysis and political action. Laid one on top of another like the multiple layers of my eyeglass lenses, my participation in multiple sites of organizing and activism gave me new vision to look at and understand the world. In this way, I began to see a relationship among punitive policies, the existence of multiple forms of violence and the lack of a transformative analysis on anti-youth violence. These lessons led to my development of the Visions to Peace Project and this dissertation.

### *Research Questions*

This research project addresses two primary questions. First, how have youth and young adults publicly articulated their analysis of violence through cultural activism and community organizing? Secondly, how have young people shaped ideologies and discourses on youth and violence? I focus primarily, but not exclusively on Black youth and young adults in this study.<sup>5</sup> I also focus more broadly

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<sup>5</sup> By Black youth, I mean young people of African descent. In one chapter (chapter 3), I discuss analysis and perspectives of Black youth who are African-American. However, in another chapter (chapter 4), my reference to Black youth also includes first and second generation immigrants. While chapter three talks specifically about the analysis and perspectives of Black youth, chapter four discusses the analysis, discourses and practices of youth of color in multiracial organizations. Racial diversity was especially prevalent within the youth organizing group I briefly discuss in California, whereas the youth organizers in Washington, D.C. were Black and Latino. (In the latter case, most



on youth of color in working-class communities. The purpose of this study is to identify and promote analysis, discourses and ideologies on youth and violence that can facilitate the development of transformative strategies and solutions for safety. Transformative strategies and solutions for safety are methods and visions of attaining safety and security through personal, community and social transformation, rather than reliance on a violent criminal legal system. This study is also apart of ongoing efforts to transform the ideological conditions at the base of the prison-industrial complex and inform political visions for safety and justice.

Through this study, I affirm and engage the ideas of young people who are often pictured in public portrayals of “youth violence,” but whose insights are often ignored. Employing their analysis alongside my own, I aim to equip scholars, policy makers, and community organizers of all ages with theoretical and discursive tools for challenging violence against youth, including the violence of criminalization. I seek to provide scholars with alternative language and conceptual approaches for research on youth and violence; inform the development of just and effective urban youth policy; and advance grassroots organizing for transformative justice. I also seek to provide educators, cultural workers and community organizers with analysis and strategies for a more holistic anti-violence praxis.

Dominant frameworks on youth and violence criminalize entire communities, ignore institutional forms of violence, and exclude the perspectives and insights of youth. Previous research clearly attests to this problem. Anti-violence efforts based in

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youth were Black, some Black youth were also Latino, and a few youth were Latino but not racially identified as Black.

a narrow definition of “violence” often facilitate additional violence.<sup>6</sup> Youth are impacted by multiple forms of violence from individuals and institutions, but conventional language and discourse does not reflect this understanding.<sup>7</sup> The experiences of young people most impacted by violence are also not reflected in prevailing discourses and frameworks.<sup>8</sup> Citing “youth violence,” nearly every state in the U.S. as well as the District of Columbia changed their juvenile justice policies in the 1990s to more punitive approaches.<sup>9</sup> Young people of color were most impacted by this shift, particularly African-American youth in poor, working-class neighborhoods. This pattern persists today.

Calls to increase “public safety” and address “youth violence” are often answered with policies that widen the reach of the criminal legal system into the lives of young people and their families.<sup>10</sup> These responses do not lead to increased safety for youth and their communities. Rather, they lead to increased institutional violence

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Iadicola and Anson Shupe, *Violence, Inequality and Human Freedom*. (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003); Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, ed., *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2006); Ann Arnett Ferguson, *Bad Boys: Public Schools and the Making of Black Masculinity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Incite! Women of Color Against Violence and Critical Resistance, “Incite! And Critical Resistance Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex,” *Social Justice* 30 no. 3, (2003); Jael Silliman and Annanya Battacharjee, introduction to *Policing the National Body: Race, Gender and Criminalization* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2002); Anne Hendrixson, “Superpredator Meets Teenage Mom: Exploding the Myth of the Out-of-Control Youth,” in *Policing the National Body: Race, Gender and Criminalization*, eds. Jael Silliman and Annanya Battacharjee (Cambridge: South End Press, 2002), 240-241; Beth Richie, *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Dorothy Roberts, *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* (New York: Basic Books, 2001)

<sup>7</sup> Collette Daiute and Michelle Fine, eds. *Journal of Social Issues, Youth Perspectives on Violence and Injustice* 59 (2003); Beth Richie, “The Social Construction of the ‘Immoral’ Black Mother: Social Policy, Community Policing, and Effects on Youth Violence,” in *Revisioning Women, Health and Healing: Feminist, Cultural and Technoscience Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 283 - 303.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Barry Feld, “Juvenile and Criminal Justice Systems’ Responses to Youth Violence,” *Crime and Justice* 24, no. 189 (1998).

<sup>10</sup> Incite! Women of Color Against Violence and Critical Resistance, “Incite! And Critical Resistance Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex,” *Social Justice* 30 no. 3, (2003), 141 – 151. This statement exposes this dynamic in relation to women and girls of color;

against youth ranging from police harassment and brutality to the destruction of low-income housing.<sup>11</sup> Hence, dominant frameworks on “youth violence” serve as the discursive foundations of punitive policies and are often the ideological fodder for institutional violence against youth. While I am concerned about the problems with these dominant scripts, I am most interested in the critical interventions that young people make when they articulate their own analysis. This dissertation analyzes the perspectives, ideologies, discourses, and social change practices of young people of color in working-class communities in order to re-vision restrictive and harmful frameworks on youth and violence.

### *Theoretical and Methodological Approaches*

In *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race and the Meaning of Justice*, Michael Hames-Garcia argues that “social theory is flawed at its core to the degree that it is unable to ground itself in the lives of [those] whom it is supposed to affect.”<sup>12</sup> I take this contention as a guiding principle for my methodological approach. Thus, I re-vision in and through the ideas and insights of youth who have boldly and publicly talked about violence in periods where they were defined as the violent. I investigate the critical analysis that youth have developed and employed about violence in the public sphere, and illuminate the practices by which youth advanced these critical understandings. Previous research has indicated that hip hop music and grassroots campaigns are key sites through which youth have created and

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<sup>11</sup> Mindy Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It* (New York: One World Books, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Hames-Garcia, *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

promulgated their analysis of political and social issues.<sup>13</sup> Thus, hip hop lyrics and materials produced during youth-led organizing campaigns form the basis of my analysis. I use discourse analysis and cultural criticism to analyze hip hop lyrics created by youth and young adults in the 1980s and 1990s. I also use historical analysis to construct a case study of how youth have developed and advanced critical discourses and ideologies on youth and violence through grassroots organizing. I also integrate additional approaches including political economic analysis and literary analysis.

Ethnography is a common methodology in scholarship on youth and violence. However, I chose not to employ ethnography for three primary reasons. First, I wanted to highlight how youths' analysis and ideologies of violence already exist within the public sphere. Secondly, I wanted to explore how young people have used music and organizing to challenge dominant scripts on violence in varying historical and geographic climates of criminalization. Lastly, I wanted to show that it is possible to examine violence against youth without the use of ethnography, and illuminate the benefits of this approach. A great deal of ethnographic scholarship on

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<sup>13</sup> Victor Rios, "From Knucklehead to Revolutionary": *Urban Youth Culture and Social Transformation*. *Journal of Urban Youth Culture* (2005). <http://juyc.org/pdf/riosvictor.pdf>; Soo Ah Kwon, *Second-Generation Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Social Change Practices* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1995); Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006). Andreanna Clay, "'All I Need Is One Mic': Mobilizing Youth for Social Change in the Post-Civil Rights Era," *Social Justice* 33, 2 (2006); 106; Jeff Chang, Constant Elevation: The Rise of Bay Area Hip-Hop Activism, (Self-published Monograph), 2004; Shawn Ginwright, "Toward A Politics of Relevance: Race, Resistance, and African American Youth Activism," *Youth Activism: A Web Forum Organized by the Social Science Research Council*, Social Science Research Council, June 2006. <http://ya.ssrc.org/african/Ginwright/>; Nilda Flores-González, Matthew Rodríguez, and Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz, "From Hip-Hop to Humanization: Batey Urbano as a Space for Latino Youth Culture and Community Action," in *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth*, ed. Shawn Ginwright, Pedro Noguera, and Julio Cammarota.(New York: Routledge, 2006).

youth and violence focuses exclusively and rather myopically on violence by and among Black youth, ignoring other forms of violence that youth experience and youths' own definitions and analysis of violence. Much of this scholarship also obscures or outright denies youths' agency and tends to offer objectifying portraits of Black youth, especially young Black men, in poor, working class communities. While I do believe that it is possible to produce ethnographic scholarship on youth and violence that avoids these problems, I hope that my methodological and analytical choices encourage youth studies scholars to branch out of the ethnographic methodological minefield and explore other possibilities. For this research project, I built and examined an archive of material sources that reveal how young people of color have advanced critical understandings of violence.

Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory serve as my theoretical and methodological frameworks. I chose these approaches because of their explicit commitment to disrupt oppressive logics, promote subjugated knowledge, and facilitate transformative praxis. Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory share similar foundational assumptions. Both theoretical approaches recognize the existence of multiple, intersecting forms of oppression including white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. Both are also committed to envisioning and facilitating liberation from these and other oppressions. Cognizant of the relationship between power and knowledge, Black feminist and Critical Race Theories focus on excavating subjugated knowledge in order to transform oppressive and unjust power relations embedded in policies and laws, institutions, and common-sense understandings of the world. In Chapter two, I provide an in depth discussion of how Black feminism and

Critical Race theory serve as theoretical and methodological frames for this research project.

### *Significance to American Studies*

American Studies' predominant focus on investigating cultural work allows us to understand how people "construct the frameworks, fashion the metaphors, create the very language by which they comprehend their experiences and think about their world."<sup>14</sup> American studies scholars analyze discourses and epistemologies to unmask the hegemonic power of accepted understandings and illuminate other ways to see, know, and interpret. In *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*, George Lipsitz contends that the cultural work of American studies itself is rooted in two different traditions:

One is the institutional American studies canonized within easily recognized paradigms like myth-symbol-image, uses-and-effects of anthropology, the new social history, and cultural studies.... what we might call the "other American studies" [is] the organic grassroots theorizing about culture and power that has informed cultural practice, social movements, and academic work for many years.<sup>15</sup>

This study is firmly rooted in both traditions of American studies. It is informed by my experiences as a community educator, organizer and cultural activist as much as what I have learned through years of post-graduate study. I draw on Black feminism and critical race theory, paradigms of oppositional thought now canonized within American Studies, to guide my analysis of still-subjugated knowledges. Lastly, I

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Lauter, *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park: Activism, Culture and American Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 11.

<sup>15</sup> George Lipsitz, *American Studies In a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 32.

locate my examination of youths “organic grassroots theorizing” on violence within the “institutional” field of youth studies.

### *Literature Review: Youth Studies*

Like other fields and disciplines developed in relation to categories of social and cultural identity, youth studies is a relatively contemporary field of knowledge production. My literature review emphasizes that youth studies is not only a field in which researchers analyze youth popular and consumer cultures, but also political practices, ideologies, and understandings promoted and developed by young people. In the United States, the study of youth in relation to social and cultural contexts started within the disciplines of criminology, psychology, and sociology and was connected to the study of delinquency and deviance. The Chicago School, a group of scholars working out of the Sociology department at the University of Chicago, is most credited for initiating this line of research beginning in the late 1920s. Perhaps the Depression with its spreading poverty and dire conditions is one reason for scholars’ focus on poor, young men during this period. Chicago School theorists such as Robert Park, E. Franklin Frazier, Frederick Thrasher, and Albert Cohen focused on developing theories and analysis of social relations in urban neighborhoods grounded in ethnographic research. Organized around the concepts of community balance, social pathology and social disorganization, the Chicago School mapped the social order of the streets and other urban landscapes using a model of plant ecology. Many Chicago school sociologists described people in urban areas, particularly young men, as delinquent, and sought to understand the world of “delinquents” as well as the conditions that led to “deviancy.”

In this research, working-class youth were defined as an urban social problem. Tensions over social class, space, and resources were typically theorized as root causes of youth delinquency and deviance.<sup>16</sup> Concepts and characteristics of “subculture” were defined through this research on youth and deviancy, as the sociologists believed that delinquent youth, especially those in gangs, developed and maintained their own subcultures. The Chicago School sociologists debated the origins of these subcultures as well as their central components and defining elements. Outside of the Chicago School, which conducted research in the vein described above up until the 1950s, there was also emerging research on youth and culture in anthropology during the Depression era. Most significantly, in 1928, Margaret Mead began applying theories of cultural relativism to the concept of adolescence<sup>17</sup>.

Today, youth remains an ambiguous categorization that can refer to physical age, a constructed stage of the life span, generational identity, performances of identity, and a political identity, among other meanings. Texts such as *Re/Constructing the Adolescent: Sign, Symbol and Body* have focused on drawing attention to these constructions, as well as the discourses built around them.<sup>18</sup> As youth studies scholars Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep argue, “youth culture studies itself has much to teach us about the production of cultural centers or margins, about which bodies and which discourses are privileged, condemned, or

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<sup>16</sup> One example of scholarship in this vein is Frederick Thrasher’s *The Gang* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927) as referenced in Michael Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures* (London: Routledge, 1980), 31 - 32.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures* (London: Routledge, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> J. A. Vadeboncoeur and L. Patel Stevens, eds., *Re/Constructing the ‘Adolescent’: Sign, Symbol and Body* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).



overlooked.”<sup>19</sup> Soep and Maira also suggest that attention to “youth” as a culture and a concept reveals the inner workings of marginalization along the lines of race, class, and gender, as well as generation.<sup>20</sup> This latter dimension is often ignored in the intersectional analyses of identity and oppression that dominate American Studies as a discipline. This dissertation foregrounds generation within intersectional analyses of identity and oppression. Like early youth studies research, it focuses on urban youth of color but unlike earlier scholarship, it employs a critical perspective.

A growing body of youth studies scholars are creating and contributing to a subfield of youth studies that moves beyond studying “problems, prevention, and pathology (i.e. negative or oppositional attitudes) among urban youth” to studying youths’ “assets, agencies, and aspirations.”<sup>21</sup> Many scholars use the term critical youth studies to refer to this subfield. According to scholars A. A. Akom, Shawn Ginwright, and Julio Cammarota, “The importance of critical youth studies as a field of academic inquiry is that it goes beyond traditional pathological approaches to assert that young people have the ability to analyze their social context, to collectively engage in critical research, and resist repressive state and ideological institutions.”<sup>22</sup> Asian American Studies and Education professors Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep define this subfield as youth culture studies – “research that recognizes the agency of youth - their meaning-making, cultural productions, and social engagements - in

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<sup>19</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, introduction to *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> A. A. Akom, Julio Cammarota, and Shawn Ginwright, “Youthopias: Toward a New Paradigm of Critical Youth Studies,” *Youth Media Reporter* (The Professional Journal for the Youth Media Field) 2, No. 4 (2008), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

relationship to cultural and political contexts."<sup>23</sup> Maira and Soep's anthology, *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* asks us to consider how youth are not only acted against, but are also active agents within local, national, and transnational cultural spheres.<sup>24</sup> Working toward the development of a new model for youth culture studies, *Youthscapes* brings together cutting-edge research that addresses how youth create identities and cultures across spaces in relation to "popular culture practices, national ideologies, and global markets."<sup>25</sup>

The concept of "youthscapes," as theorized by Maira and Soep, drives the reconceptualization of youth practices and meanings, as well as the definition of youth itself. The idea of "scape," as developed by social theorist and globalization scholar, Arjun Appadurai, is seminal to their work. Appadurai's concept of "scape" connotes global flows of culture and capital characterized by fluid and irregular hierarchies of power. Similar to Appadurai's ethnoscapescapes, technoscapescapes, financescapescapes, mediascapescapes, and ideascapescapes, youthscapes are sites that are simultaneously social, political, and geographic – "a 'place' that is bound up with questions of power and materiality."<sup>26</sup> But unlike Appadurai's scapescapes, "a youthscape is not a unit of analysis, but an approach that potentially revitalizes discussions about youth cultures and social movements while simultaneously theorizing the political and social uses of youth to maintain repressive systems of social control.

Youthscape, therefore, refers not just to a generational term, but to a conceptual lens and methodological approach to youth culture, which

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<sup>23</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elizabeth Soep *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, eds., *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elizabeth Soep, *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* 2005, xv.

<sup>26</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, introduction to *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), xv.

brings together questions about popular culture and relations of power in local, national and globalized contexts.”<sup>27</sup>

Within the theory of youthscaapes, youth is a social achievement, a condition and construction that is produced with substantial work. Seeing youth as an achieved designation versus a given grouping enables a fuller conceptualization of the local and global interactions, institutions and interstices that construct youth as a viable unit of cultural and material significance.<sup>28</sup> This approach envisions youth as a uniquely vulnerable and powerful social set that acts and is acted upon within and across spaces, a "shifting group of people" as well as "a deeply ideological category."<sup>29</sup>

The ‘youthscaapes’ approach enables youth culture studies to address issues that connect to, yet have generally remained outside of, the field’s fixation on popular and commodity cultures and youth cultural consumption and production. It asks youth studies scholars to consider youth in the context of transnationalism and globalization; develop new models for studying global capitalism, migration, and border cultures; and view identities and categories as they are transformed by transnational flows of culture, information, and technology. It also urges us to continue to debate issues of autonomy, assemblage and imperialism in their cultural, national and imperial manifestations using new tools of analysis toward the

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<sup>27</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, introduction to *Youthscaapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), xviii

<sup>28</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, introduction to *Youthscaapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), xviii.

<sup>29</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, introduction to *Youthscaapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

furtherance of social justice.<sup>30</sup> Although I do not employ the term or conceptual framework of youthscape in this study, the framework is helpful in situating the ways in which definitions, discourses, and constructions of youth are differentially constructed in relation to space and place and in relation to multiple identities, issues and institutions. I also draw from the youthscape approach in that I do not use the term youth as a fixed signifier but as a political identity.

In relation to this project on discourses of youth and violence, one of the most provocative questions Maira and Soep ask is:

How is the category of youth reshaped in settings where young people are on the front lines of wars within and between nations, or when particular groups of youth bear the brunt of violence, profiling and incarceration by the state, and find themselves caught between various models of childhood and human rights that are often manipulated by state and nongovernmental agencies for political and material ends?"<sup>31</sup>

Many of these questions and issues are addressed in *Youthscape* in articles such as “‘The Intimate and the Imperial’ South Asian Muslim Immigrant Youth After 9/11.”<sup>32</sup> Drawing from theories and methods including ethnography, discourse analysis, and psychoanalysis in combination with the epistemologies and grounded theories of the youth they research (alongside), contributing scholars redefine interdisciplinarity by “listening for theories that may rarely if ever appear as such in any literature, but which play an important role in shaping the lives of young people

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<sup>30</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, introduction to *Youthscape: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, introduction to *Youthscape: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), xvii.

<sup>32</sup> Sunaina Maira, “‘The Intimate and the Imperial’: South Asian Muslim Immigrant Youth After 9/11.” Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, eds. *Youthscape: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

and their real, imaginary, and institutionalized ‘others’ ”<sup>33</sup> My dissertation reflects this redefinition of interdisciplinarity by incorporating the grounded theories of young people alongside accepted theories in cultural studies.

Additional works that include research conducted from a critical youth studies or youth culture studies framework include *Youth Cultures: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (1995); *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures* (1998), and *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America* (1998).<sup>34</sup> In *Youth Cultures: A Cross Cultural Perspective*, social anthropologists Vered Amit-Talai and Helena Wulff bring together ethnographic analyses of youth practices in various nations in order to increase the study of youth culture within anthropology and broaden the field of youth culture studies using anthropology. As anthropology and American studies share culture as a focal point of study, the statement in which they describe the significance of youth culture studies to anthropology is also relevant to American studies:

The analysis of youth cultural production raises questions which are at the very heart of contemporary debates in anthropology. It involves consideration of the relation between highly localized practices, forms of cultural activity and more widely distributed practices and products; of the social context of meaning; of how anthropologists can deal with collectivities and cultural constructions, which are ephemeral rather than enduring; of cultural reproduction, globalization and creolization, to mention but some issues that are dealt with in this volume. We hope to contribute to the general current concern with ‘rewriting’ culture in anthropology, even while we seek to close particular gaps in youth studies.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, eds. *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), xxxv.

<sup>34</sup> Vered Amit-Talai and Helena Wulff, eds. *Youth Cultures: A Cross Cultural Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1995); Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine, *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Joe Austin and Michael Willard, eds. *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Vered Amit-Talai and Helena Wulff, introduction to *Youth Cultures: A Cross Cultural Perspective*, Vered Amit-Talai and Helena Wulff, eds. (London: Routledge, 1995), 1-2.

In form, *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Culture* is similar to *Youth Cultures: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, but its approaches, methods and theories come from the discipline of cultural geography, rather than social anthropology.<sup>36</sup>

*Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America*, edited by American studies scholars Joe Austin and Michael Willard, is a collection of essays and articles on various aspects of youth history and culture throughout the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> From Native American boxing, zoot suits, panty raids and Brown Berets to double dutch, skateboarding, queer sexuality, and Hmong identity, *Generations of Youth* serves “to emphasize the necessity of positioning youth within the larger framework of modern U.S. history.”<sup>38</sup> Related to the topic of transnationalism, the volume contains several articles that demonstrate dynamic interchanges between diasporic and youth cultures. These include “ ‘Memories of El Monte’: Intercultural Dance Halls in Post World War II Greater Los Angeles by matt garcia [sic], “Brown ‘Hordes’ in McIntosh Suits: Filipinos, Taxi Dance Halls, and Performing the Immigrant Body in Los Angeles, 1930s-1940s by Linda N. España-Maram, and Hmong American Youth: American Dream, American Nightmare” by William Wei. American Studies scholars David Roediger, Robin D.G. Kelley, and George Lipsitz also contributed articles to the volume.

Through the work of these and other scholars from history, sociology and cultural studies, *Generations of Youth* also demonstrates the significance of youth

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<sup>36</sup> Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine, *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> Joe Austin and Michael Willard, eds. *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Miriam Formanek-Brunell, “Book review of *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth Century America*.” *Journal of American History* 89.2 (1999).

studies to American Studies in a number of ways. First, it shows how, as one popular culture critic concisely states: “Youth debates are important forums where new understandings about the past, present, and future life, are encoded, articulated and contested.”<sup>39</sup> Secondly, it shows that the same issues at the center of contemporary American studies scholarship animate the growing field of youth studies. These concerns include citizenship and national ideology, social justice, agency, resistance, identity, culture, discourse. This research project on how youth advance critical understandings of violence in climates of criminalization addresses these themes and concerns.

### ***Citizenship and National Ideology***

Through explorations of American identity, state discourses, and national belonging, questions about citizenship and national ideology have remained important within American studies since its inception. Recent work in youth culture studies probes these issues as they relate to the construction of youth identity, politics and language practices. Scholars conducting research in these areas ask, “How does the state define youth as citizens and non-citizens?” and “How do youth respond to and develop their own interpretations of national ideologies, state policies and conceptions of citizenship?”<sup>40</sup> The answers to these questions not only tell us about the practices and understandings of young people, but also heighten our understanding of the multiple forms of citizenship from legal to cultural available to individuals and groups in the U.S. They also serve to increase our knowledge of the

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<sup>39</sup> Miriam Formanek-Brunell, “Book review of *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth Century America*.” *Journal of American History* 89.2 (1999).

<sup>40</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, eds. *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

ways we as scholars and activists within American studies can contest confining definitions that lie at the core of state ideologies and practices.

Sunaina Maira's "The Intimate and the Imperial: South Asian Muslim Immigrant Youth After 9/11" and Murray Forman's "Straight Outta Mogadishu: Prescribed Identities and Performative Practices Among Somali Youth in North American High Schools" are helpful in addressing questions of state definitions and youths' responses.<sup>41</sup> Maira's research describes the South Asian Muslim immigrant youth she works with in Cambridge, Massachusetts as subjects forced to participate in "dissenting citizenship" even as the state denies them recognition and rights as legal citizens. Especially meaningful in the contemporary landscape of hyper-surveillance and resurgent McCarthyism of grave concern to many American Studies intellectuals, Maira reminds us: "It is important to situate the "new racism" directed at Muslim or Arab American youth in the context of ongoing racial profiling, surveillance, and detention of other youth of color in the United States, and the ways in which those practices have historically secured a national consensus around a particular definition of citizenship."<sup>42</sup> In "Straight Outta Mogadishu," Somali youth in the United States and Canada also encounter and negotiate contradictory meanings of race, nation, and citizenship as they form and perform new identities. Analyzing the ways expressions of Black cultural authenticity impact Black immigrant youth, one of the most interesting aspects of Forman's article is his finding that many of these youth

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<sup>41</sup> Sunaina Maira, "'The Intimate and the Imperial': South Asian Muslim Immigrant Youth After 9/11." Sunaina Maira and Elizabeth Soep, eds. *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 64 -81; Murray Forman, "Straight Outta Mogadishu: Prescribed Identities and Performative Practices among Somali Youth in North American High Schools" Sunaina Maira and Elizabeth Soep, eds. *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 3 - 22,

<sup>42</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, introduction to *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), xxvii.



experience hip hop as a hegemonic discourse. Forman's article also serves to remind American Studies practitioners that not all Black youth in the U.S. are African-American.

The research of rhetorician and ethnographer Ralph Cintron similarly intersects race, nation and generation in response to the question of how youth develop their own uses and understandings of national ideologies. In "Gangs and their Walls" and *Angels Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and the Rhetorics of Everyday*, Cintron documents the ways that the lexicon, syntax, and icons within Mexican American youths' street gang graffiti employed the rhetoric and discourses of nationhood.<sup>43</sup> Citing the appropriation of national ideologies by several gangs in a Midwestern Latino community, he considers the "shadow system" they developed as evidence that young gang members do not necessarily equate nationhood with the nation-state. In conclusion, Cintron suggests that the narrative power of nationalism makes it attractive for youth to employ and subvert for their own uses.

Each of these texts reveals the centrality of age to the political identity of the nation. According to Maira and Soep, "the construction of youth as a 'transitional' category of citizenship reveals the role of the state in defining youth and points to what Philip Mizen calls 'the importance of age to the political management of social

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<sup>43</sup> Ralph Cintron, "Gangs and their Walls," in *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global*, Sunaina Maira and Elizabeth Soep, eds. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 23-42; Ralph Cintron, *Angels' Town: Chero Ways: Gang Life, and the Rhetorics of Everyday* (New York: Beacon Press, 1998).

relations" by the state."<sup>44</sup> Though it is true that the citizenship rights of many youth increase alongside their cognitive abilities as they 'transition' into adulthood,

“there is often an assumption in traditional work on youth and citizenship, for example, that young citizens -- to the extent that they have rights, which are often limited -- must be socialized into adult norms of political involvement rather than being thinking agents who may express important critiques of citizenship and nationhood.”<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, this cultural construction is essential to the labor divisions and material hierarchies at the core of capitalist political economies.<sup>46</sup> By analyzing the methods in which youth are interpellated by and make sense of the discourses scripting norms of national belonging, American Studies scholars can better deconstruct the concepts and myths that lie at the core of state policies, ideologies, and citizenship. My dissertation contributes to this area by analyzing how the concepts and myths surrounding youths' participation in violence are at the center of carceral ideologies and policies. Concurrent with the critical youth studies framework, I discuss how youth have theorized about these concepts and myths and worked to revision them through community organizing and cultural activism. My investigation of youth's participation in cultural activism centers on hip hop music, which is also a form of popular culture.

## **Popular Culture**

Though popular culture includes sports, films, television programs, internet sites, magazines, and other mediated sites, music is the predominant focus of contemporary research on youth culture. *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth*

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<sup>44</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, introduction to *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), xxii.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, introduction to *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), xxiii

*Culture* is an anthology of articles on youth music styles and the associated cultures.<sup>47</sup> Most of the articles examine aspects of rock or hip hop, perhaps the two most studied genres of popular culture in contemporary youth culture studies. Other notable scholarship on youth, hip hop, and rock includes Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Robin Kelley's "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles"; and Simon Frith's *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock'n' Roll*.<sup>48</sup> According to *Microphone Fiends*' co-editor Andrew Ross, cultural studies scholars should pay close attention to this work is because "the level of attention and meaning invested in music by youth is still unmatched by almost any other organized activity in society including religion."<sup>49</sup>

My study also shows that it is important to pay close attention to the analysis that youth promote as well as receive through music because it informs the development of political consciousness. In *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth*, Henry Giroux makes a similar argument. Giroux argues that despite the violent stereotypes of youth propagated by mainstream media and Hollywood films in particular, popular culture can be used as a form of cultural pedagogy to engage, challenge, and transform youth as well as schooling practices.<sup>50</sup> Giroux uses Calvin Klein ads and Hollywood films portraying youth to buttress his arguments and

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<sup>47</sup> Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Robin D. G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' in Postindustrial Los Angeles," in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 183 – 288; Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Ross, introduction to *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>50</sup> Henry Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

explain the pedagogical potential of popular culture. Whereas Giroux focuses on the difference that educators can make by using popular culture developed by adults, my study reveals the pedagogical potential of popular created by young people.

Youth culture scholarship on popular culture often provides fresh approaches, insightful analyses, and new linkages to existing fields and disciplines. Two innovative studies of youth popular culture published in the late '90s exemplify this trend. Principally affiliated with Asian American Studies, Sunaina Maira's *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* shows how Indian American youth use popular cultures, such as bhangra, to recognize and negotiate the place of gender, race and ethnicity in their identities.<sup>51</sup> While Maira examines how youth use popular culture as a tool for negotiation, my dissertation examines how youth have used popular culture as a tool for cultural activism and ideological contestation. In *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture*, historian Eric Zolov describes how young people in Mexico used English-language rock music from the United States to inspire and fuel the student movement of the late 1960s, challenging the post-revolutionary state in Mexico.<sup>52</sup> This dissertation suggests that the analysis of violence in hip hop music developed by young people in the 1980s and early 90s shaped the ideologies and discourses at the center of contemporary youth organizing movements. Both Maira and Zolov use their books to challenge widespread theoretical understandings of the relationships among youth popular culture, social identities, and social movements. As works that are located within the

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<sup>51</sup> Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.)

<sup>52</sup> Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

disciplines of ethnic studies and history, these texts also illuminate the ways in which youth identities, cultures, and discourses are increasingly central in humanities and social sciences scholarship. My project makes a similar contribution.

### ***Criminalization and Incarceration***

Contemporary cultural research examining youth criminalization and incarceration emerges from a plethora of academic disciplines, interdisciplinary fields, and popular locations. Research on the spatial containment of youth is reflective of this interdisciplinary. Scholars within and outside the discipline of geography have looked at the ways that gentrification privatizes urban public spaces and excludes youth from these places in the name of revitalization. According to research by Mike Davis, policing and surveillance are used as technologies to (rein)force exclusion from public space, particularly the exclusion of Black and Latino youth. In *City of Quartz*, Davis describes large areas of Southern California that Black and Chicano youth cannot enter without the possibility of police harassment or arrest.<sup>53</sup> In “‘Busing It In the City’: Black Youth, Performance and Public Transit,” cultural studies scholar Nicole Fleetwood substantiates the idea that policing functions to exclude young people of color from public spaces:

On public transportation, the fear factor is so strong that most urban centers have special police forces specifically assigned to the transit system. Policing on public transportation appears to be more concerned with restricting youth of color than protecting the well-being of the general public. The logic of youth as deviant guarantees that the goal of both operations is synonymous.<sup>54</sup>

Fleetwood and other scholars also discuss ways that youth resist their exclusion from

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<sup>53</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

<sup>54</sup> Nicole Fleetwood, “Busing It in the City: Black Youth, Performance and Public Transit,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 48, No. 2 (2004), 33.

public space through behaviors such as loud-talking or the creation of public art such as graffiti. The skyrocketing rate of incarceration in the United States makes this area of scholarship on youth one that American Studies scholars cannot afford to ignore. Literary scholar Bruce Franklin has stated: “American Studies is crippled by not seeing how prison is related to all the fields we work in.”<sup>55</sup> As much of this research indicates, the criminalization and incarceration of young people of color fuels the crowded detention centers and prisons at the center of the prison industrial complex.

Seemingly, since the genesis of youth studies as a popular and academic enterprise, adults inside and outside of academia have portrayed youth as deviant subjects. In “Bad Boys and Invisible Girls: Youth, Crime and ‘Delinquency,’” British social psychologist Christina Griffin documents the continuation of this tendency. Griffin assesses and deconstructs theories and discourses of youth and delinquency from research published in the 1980s, concluding that of the available research on ‘delinquency,’ “the focus on young, white working-class, African-American and/or British-Caribbean men is almost overwhelming. Lori Dorfman and Vincent Schiraldi’s “Off Balance: Youth, Race and Crime in the News,” a national study of youth portrayals in the media, reaches similar conclusions in relation to mainstream media coverage.<sup>56</sup> They found that depictions of crime in the news are not reflective of the rate of crime generally, the proportion of crime which is violent, the proportion of crime committed by people of color, or the proportion of crime committed by youth. My study makes an important contribution to these works by examining how

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<sup>55</sup> Mary Helen Washington, “Prison Studies as a Part of American Studies,” Washington, D.C: American Studies Association, 1999.

<sup>56</sup> Lori Dorfman and Vincent Schiraldi, “Off Balance: Youth, Race and Crime in the News,” Washington, D.C. :Building Blocks for Youth, 2001.

youth have researched, analyzed and resisted this criminalization, particularly through contesting and challenging stock stories on youth and violence.

The criminalization of young people also extends beyond their representations in research and the corporate media. A growing body of research documents the criminalization of young people of color in schools. In *Bad Boys: Public Schools and the Making of Black Masculinity*, African American studies and Women's studies scholar Ann Arnette Ferguson poignantly captures what many have come to call the "school-to prison pipeline" through an ethnographic study of punishment practices at Rosa Parks Elementary School:

"What I observed at Rosa Parks during more than three years of fieldwork in the school...made it clear that just as children were tracked into futures as doctors, scientists, engineers and fast-food workers, there were also tracks for some children, predominantly African-American and male, that led to prison."<sup>57</sup>

Inside and outside of school, disciplinary procedures, popular discourses, social myths, and codified policies connect many young people to criminalization and incarceration. However, there are few studies that show how youth have challenges these procedures, discourses, myths and codified policies. My study contributes understanding in this area.

Additional research on youth and incarceration examines the experiences of young people in prison, as well as the impacts of prison culture and the prison industrial complex on the cultural identities and experiences of young people outside of prison walls. Both of these research trajectories illustrate how the line between youth inside and outside of prison blurs as young people are shuffled back and forth

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<sup>57</sup> Ann Arnette Ferguson, *Bad Boys: Public Schools and the Making of Black Masculinity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

between detention centers and other locations and as surveillance and containment practices increase in low-income communities of color. Beth Richie's article, "Queering Antiprison Work: African American Lesbians in the Juvenile Justice System," is particularly significant because it brings an analysis of violence against young women as well as queer sexuality into the heteronormative, male-dominated literature on youth incarceration and criminalization.<sup>58</sup> Richie's development of a Black feminist queer antiprison framework centers the experiences of young Black lesbians to "broaden the political and intellectual agenda against mass incarceration."<sup>59</sup> This work shows how conceptions of "youth violence" do not only reference young men, but are also used to interpellate Black girls and young Black lesbians as criminals.

In "She Who Believes in Freedom: Young Activists Defy the Prison Industrial Complex," Robin Templeton argues that young women of color are at the forefront of organizing against prisons and police brutality in the U.S.<sup>60</sup> She explores reasons for young women's leadership of anti-prison organizing and theorizes a relationship between third-wave feminism and the movement against the prison industrial complex. Templeton analyzes the ideologies, inspirations, and visions that characterize young women of color organizing against the prison industrial complex. According to Templeton, the anti-prison and the (overlapping) youth organizing

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<sup>58</sup> Beth Richie, "Queering Antiprison Work: African American Lesbians in the Juvenile Justice System," in *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-industrial Complex*, ed. Julia Sudbury (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>59</sup> Beth Richie, "Queering Antiprison Work: African American Lesbians in the Juvenile Justice System," in *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-industrial Complex*, ed. Julia Sudbury (New York: Routledge, 2004), 82.

<sup>60</sup> Robin Templeton, "She Who Believes in Freedom: Young Activists Defy the Prison Industrial Complex," in *The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism*, Vivien Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin, eds. (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 254 – 278.



movement emphasize the intersections of race, class, and gender, rely on a feminist-centered leadership and emphasize issues that personally affect organizers, their families and their communities. Templeton discusses young women at the helm of organizations and campaigns in California, including Alicia Yang, then 23, who is Asian Lateefah Simon, 26, who is African-American, and Raquel Lavina, who is Latina. Similarly, the juvenile justice reform organization that I discuss in this work was directed by a Black women in her twenties. Although, I did not focus on her analysis and visions as an individual or did not conceptualize her as a “young person” in this work, my study contributes a case study of a youth organizing campaign against incarceration and criminalization that was in part led (or coordinated) by a young Black feminist.

Cultural analysts have also explored youth incarceration and criminalization through the lens of hip hop. For example, Bakari Kitwana’s *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* includes a chapter called "Race War: Policing, Incarceration and the Containment of Black Youth" Here, Kitwana argues that "prison culture [promulgated through hip hop culture] in the 1980s and the 1990s has affected not only the manner in which this generation is perceived but the manner it perceives themselves."<sup>61</sup> In this research project, I turn to hip hop as one significant site to mine Black youths’ subjugated discourses and critical analysis of violence.

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<sup>61</sup> Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books), 2003.

## *Violence*

While there are large bodies of research on youth and violence, there is minimal scholarship produced from a youth cultural studies framework. In fact, it is rare for scholars writing about issues of youth and violence to center the perspectives and ideologies of young people within their work. To address this problem, *The Journal of Social Issues* published a special volume called, “Youth Perspectives on Violence and Injustice” dedicated to bringing together new analyses on violence, injustice and social justice based on the experiences and perspectives of young people.<sup>62</sup> According to issue editors Collette Daiute and Michelle Fine, “the goal of this issue of *JSI* is to theorize, explain and illustrate youth as an analytic perspective rather than the object of violence studies.”<sup>63</sup> Going beyond “violence enacted by youth,” researchers articulated that conversations on youth and violence must also include “violence witnessed by youth,” “violence experienced by youth,” and “violence perpetrated institutionally and historically on youth.”<sup>64</sup> Their definition of youth ranged from “seven year-olds through young adults entering college.” Nearly all of the studies in the volume focus on young people of color.

In “Black Youth Violence Has a Bad Rap,” Jabari Mahiri and Erin Connor draw on their ethnographic research with Black middle school students to explain how the construction and maintenance of social myths criminalize, contain,

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<sup>62</sup> Collette Daiute and Michelle Fine. “Youth Perspectives on Violence and Injustice.” *The Journal of Social Issues*. Vol 59. No. 1, 2003.

<sup>63</sup> Collette Daiute and Michelle Fine. “Youth Perspectives on Violence and Injustice.” *The Journal of Social Issues*. Vol 59. No. 1, 2003, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Collette Daiute and Michelle Fine. “Youth Perspectives on Violence and Injustice.” *The Journal of Social Issues*. Vol 59. No. 1, 2003, 3.

scapegoat, and frame Black youth, especially young Black men.<sup>65</sup> This cultural violence can result in the physical and psychological damage of Black youth through the internalization of harmful beliefs and the presence of physical threats resulting from consumption of these tales by police and others. Mahiri and Connor juxtapose these dominant and damaging discourses with Black middle school students' more critical perspectives on violence. Jocelyn Solis conducted similar research on youth and violence through ethnographic research and interviews with youth and adult members of a Mexican immigrant organization in New York.<sup>66</sup> Solis argues that immigration laws, mass media and popular discourses, which define undocumented Mexican immigrants as illegal, cause psychological harm to young people and legitimize physical violence against them. Solis also suggests that Mexican immigrant youth sometimes committed acts of violence against less powerful peers as expressions of violence internalized from social institutions.

The research collected in the *Journal of Social Issues* volume on “Youth Perspectives on Violence and Injustice” demonstrate that young people – and particularly young people of color – experience multiple forms of violence by adults, institutions, and social structures, and are critically aware of this violence. This research also centers age as a significant analytical lens alongside race, ethnicity and nationality. Most of the volume's articles, however, lack a sufficient gendered analysis. As a whole, the studies also fail to address the ways in which young people

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<sup>65</sup> Jabari Mahiri and Erin Connor. “Black Youth Violence Has a Bad Rap.” *The Journal of Social Issues*. Vol 59. No. 1, 2003.

<sup>66</sup> Jocelyn Solis. “Rethinking Illegality as a Violence Against, not by, Mexican Immigrants, Children and Youth. *The Journal of Social Issues*. Vol 59. No. 1, 2003.

are not only experiencing and talking about violence, but also working to transform public understandings of violence, as well as violence itself. Because nearly all of the studies employ an ethnographic or interview-based methodology, the researchers facilitate and mediate young people's understandings through their questions they ask, the notes they take, and their own presence. Other studies that incorporate youth perspectives on violence rely on similar ethnographic approaches, but also address how young people work together to take action against violence.

In *Inner-city Kids: Adolescents Confront Life and Violence in an Urban Community*, Alice McIntyre engaged a class of middle school students in a multi-year participatory action research project that explores the problems within their community and the actions they took to create change.<sup>67</sup> Working closely with McIntyre and a team of graduate school students, the students used creative exercises such as collage-making and community photography to explore their ideas about community and discuss problems and issues that concerned them. According to McIntyre, "The most salient issues that emerged during the first year of the project were the participants' concerns about violence."

The violence the participants describe and experience in their school and community goes beyond the more generally accepted definition of violence as "rough or injurious physical force, action, or treatment" (*Webster's College Dictionary* 1996). There is also a preponderance of environmental violence characterized by trash, pollution, graffiti, abandoned houses, and drug paraphernalia in the streets.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to presenting youths' stories about interpersonal violence and environmental violence in their school and community, *Inner City Kids* provides a

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<sup>67</sup> Alice McIntyre, *Inner-city Kids: Adolescents Confront Life and Violence in an Urban Community* (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

<sup>68</sup> Alice McIntyre, *Inner-city Kids: Adolescents Confront Life and Violence in an Urban Community* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 8.

brief look at how the lack of opportunities and supports for young people to reach their goals can be understood as “educational violence.” The students and research team worked together to design and implement two projects – a long-term neighborhood clean-up program and a short-term career exploration program -- to address these problems. In the process, participants also learned to broaden their definition of violence and change their own behaviors and interactions that contributed to interpersonal and environmental violence. They also came to understand that structural issues – such as the absence of public trash cans in their neighborhoods – were at the root of what they initially saw as behavioral problems. Despite their recognition of structural issues, McIntyre and her research team focused predominately on helping young people correct individual behaviors that contributed to violence, but provided little support to address and transform structural inequities.

In contrast, Victor Rios’ article, “‘From Knucklehead to Revolutionary:’ Urban Youth Culture and Social Transformation,” focuses on young people’s efforts to take action against state violence and illuminates the relationships among state violence and interpersonal violence such as misogyny.<sup>69</sup> Rios conducted ethnographic research with working-class Latino youth organizers, analyzing how they politicize other young people in their communities, teach about localized repression, and develop epistemologies of racism, globalization, patriarchy, state violence, and resistance. In addition to using data from interviews he conducted with youth organizers in *Ollin*, a community organization whose name means “movement” in Nahuatl, he also draws from his earlier experiences as a young organizer in *Ollin* and

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<sup>69</sup> Victor Rios, “From Knucklehead to Revolutionary”: Urban Youth Culture and Social Transformation. *Journal of Urban Youth Culture* (2005).

his ongoing participation in *Ollin* as an adult supporter. Building on theories and concepts of oppositional consciousness, infrapolitics, organic intellectuals, and social movements, Rios develops and employs a “community theorizing” method in which youth collectively theorize their activities and ideas in conjunction with his own analysis.

Drawing primarily from the theories of Gloria Anzaldua, Antonio Gramsci, and James C. Scott, Rios ultimately argues that youth activists “entangle” revolutionary political and cultural messages in popular culture that may offer contradictory messages, but ultimately serve to transform ideologies of race, gender, and youth. Conducted as part of his dissertation research on the criminalization of Black and Latino young men, Rios’ study reveals how a group of high school student organizers in Oakland, CA work to resist criminalizing policies and discourses targeted against them and their communities. As a result of this focus, this project is more closely related to Rios’ work than other existing studies that center youths’ perspectives of violence. Unlike Rios’ research, I did not use ethnography and interviews to solicit young people’s perspectives in private spaces. However like Rios, I draw from personal experience in some aspects of this research project. I also describe and analyze material sources through which youth have recorded and publicly articulated their own understandings and ideologies. As a result of analyzing these public texts rather than conducting ethnographic research or interviews, I am better able to understand how young people have challenged hegemonic discourses of violence in the public domain.

## *Significance*

This study analyzes how youth contest mainstream understandings of violence in an era characterized by rising incarceration and a massive prison industry. Shifting debates and discourses on youth and violence is fundamental to challenging the punitive and criminalizing ideologies and policies that lie at the foundation of the prison-industrial complex. Luis Rodriguez's call for a new paradigm on youth and violence underscores this relationship. Rodriguez, an anti-violence activist and co-founder of Youth Struggling for Survival in Chicago, asserts:

Schools, law enforcement, youth agencies, child protective services, and even religious institutions are becoming entangled in a web of policies and directives to turn our back on a significant section of young people of color. We need, therefore, a broad and encompassing national debate on all the issues surrounding youth and violence. It is time we challenged the concepts that young people are unredeemable, that "super-predators" are prepared to overrun our streets in a generation or two, and that the only way to be safe is to build more prisons, institute 'zero tolerance' laws wherever youth encounter programs, and take the 'deviants' from our midst.

According to Rodriguez, locating violence among youth in relationship to the political and economic abandonment of urban youth and the impact of trauma in young people's lives allows us to understand the need for community empowerment, healing, political-economic restructuring, and cultural change as viable strategies for building safety and peace. Similarly, Alice McIntyre writes that "[youths'] stories of violence are points of entry into how they—and we—can better understand the impact of violence on young people and, with that understanding, develop realistic strategies for insuring that urban youth can live in a safe environment, succeed in life, and thrive as creative, productive human beings.<sup>70</sup> By attending to the stories and

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<sup>70</sup> Alice McIntyre, *Inner-city Kids: Adolescents Confront Life and Violence in an Urban Community* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 8.

analysis of criminalized youth in particular, this dissertation challenges popular and scholarly understandings of youth and violence that perpetuate the destructive ideologies and policies at the foundation of the prison-industrial complex.

Recognizing the role that academic research plays in developing and promoting dangerous and damaging discourses on young people and violence, this manuscript circulates a more holistic analysis of violence while simultaneously affirming the agency and intellect of young people and their participation in social change. Alice McIntyre has pointed out that most of the existing social science research on violence, broadly as well as youth and violence, specifically, reflects an individualistic perspective. This body of research exclusively defines violence as the acts of individuals and conflates the perpetrators of individual violence with specific demographic groups. She also argues that this research – and the public opinion it shapes – contributes to the ways that youth think about violence. In McIntyre’s words, “by taking an individualistic perspective on violence within social science research, we contribute to the way young people think about violence as well. They too fall prey to individualizing violence within certain types of people.”<sup>71</sup> Likewise, youth are not immune to pervasive systems of patriarchy, heterosexism, and other oppressions that underlie many acts of interpersonal and community violence. Rather than give detailed account of interpersonal violence, I respond to repeated calls that scholars “move away from a focus on urban youths’ needs, deficiencies, and problems, and to apply our [critical] theories and research methodologies to an examination of urban adolescents’ assets, skills, and talents for individual and

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<sup>71</sup> Alice McIntyre, *Inner-city Kids: Adolescents Confront Life and Violence in an Urban Community* (New York: NYU Press, 2000).



collective mobilization and resistance.”<sup>72</sup> These assets include keen observation, critical insight, and astute analysis, which I foreground in this research.

In doing so, this project affirms and promotes knowledge and insights that academic scholars, policy makers and marginalized communities need to hear – not because it is new, but because it is necessary for social change. Media and policy analyst Makani Themba poignantly reminds, “although people are not talking about data and theory in the supermarket line, they often already possess an awareness and analysis of the social issues that affect their lives.”<sup>73</sup>

Therefore, it is not giving people information that’s key to motivating them to act, but validating their perceptions and *conveying a sense that the change they dare to imagine in these private spaces is achievable and desired by a great many others*. This validation occurs when an individual or group “breaks out” and publicly articulates the hidden transcript. This moment of unveiling is key as it provides previously isolated groups a context and sense that their beliefs are shared by the majority.”<sup>74</sup>

Literary critic Barbara Christian echoes this sentiment when she writes that, “For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know *is*.”<sup>75</sup>

My readings do presuppose a need, a desire among folk who like me also want to save their own lives. My concern, then, is a passionate one, for the literature of people who are not in power has always been in danger of extinction or of cooptation, not because we do not theorize, but because what we can even imagine, far less who we can reach, is constantly limited by society’s structures. For me, literary criticism is promotion as well as understanding, a response to the writer to whom there is often no response, to folk who need the writing as much as they need anything. I know, from literary theory, that writing disappears unless there is a response to it. Because

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<sup>72</sup> Alice McIntyre, *Inner-city Kids: Adolescents Confront Life and Violence in an Urban Community* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>73</sup> Makani Themba, *Making Policy, Making Change: How Communities Are Taking the Law Into Their Own Hands* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 23.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 21.

I write about writers who are now writing, I hope to help ensure that their tradition has continuity and survives.”<sup>76</sup>

Although I am not producing traditional literary criticism, Christian’s writings on the significance of her work are wholly relevant to this project. I write about the sermons that youth have preached – through cultural activism and community organizing – to inform and inspire social change by taking a seat in “the Amen corner.”

I hope that this work contributes to the abolition of prisons and creation of safe and sustainable communities by challenging the ideological terrain underlying incarceration. In the words of other activist-scholars committed to this mission, the work we produce must “destabilize dominant social discourses on crime and violence,” “rupture the ideological structures embodied by the rise of the prison-industrial complex,” and “construct political language and theoretical discourse that disarticulates crime from punishment”<sup>77</sup> While it is much easier to heed this call when addressing property crimes or drug-related offenses, we have a much more difficult time when it comes to issues of violence and safety. This is due in large part to the fact that, as Jael Silliman has shown, “the political right has monopolized the discourse on public safety to justify the widening net of the criminal justice system. This leaves communities victimized by excessive imprisonment and violence with few alternative frameworks for pursuing safety.”<sup>78</sup> By showcasing critical theories of state and community violence by young people resisting criminalization, this

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<sup>76</sup> Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 21 – 22.

<sup>77</sup> Jael Silliman and Annanya Battacharjee, introduction to *Policing the National Body: Race, Gender and Criminalization* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2002); xxx; Angela Davis and Dylan Rodriguez, “The Challenge of Prison Abolition: A Conversation” *Social Justice* (September 2000), 217; Angela Davis and Dylan Rodriguez, “The Challenge of Prison Abolition: A Conversation” *Social Justice* (September 2000), 216

<sup>78</sup> Jael Silliman and Annanya Battacharjee, introduction to *Policing the National Body: Race, Gender and Criminalization* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2002), xvvi

dissertation challenges policy makers and community members to consider strategies for safety that do not depend upon policing and incarceration.

I believe that this dissertation can inform the development of effective policies to address violence against youth, particularly youth in poor working-class communities of color. Current policy responses to “youth violence” are based on a very narrow understanding of violence against young people as well as a very narrow recognition of what counts as violence. Avery Gordon eloquently speaks to this political and societal problem in her book, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. She wrote:

[O]ur country’s major institutions – the corporation, the law, the state, the media, the public—recognize narrower and narrower evidence for the harms and indignities that citizens and residents experience. The most obvious violations – the poverty, the gaping inequalities of resources, the brutality of the police, the corruption of democratic politics, the hunger and homelessness, the hateful beatings and batterings – are everywhere to be seen only in the disappearing hypervisibility of their fascinating anomalousness.<sup>79</sup>

To the list of these most “obvious violations” I add the imprisonment of children and teenagers for more years than they have lived, the bulldozing of low-income housing to build expensive developments, and the rechanneling of resources for education and public services into policing and surveillance. Too often, these violations and others like it are passed into law as solutions to crime and interpersonal violence. In other words, most youth-focused policy efforts exacerbate and produce violence and/or increase young people’s vulnerability to violence rather than ameliorate the harmful and damaging conditions that are root causes of violence.<sup>80</sup> In the words of a group of

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<sup>79</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>80</sup> Shawn Ginwright, Julio Cammarota, and Pedro Noguera, “Youth, Social Justice, and Communities: Toward a Theory of Urban Youth Policy,” *Social Justice* 32 no. 3 (2005).

men at Folsom Prison in the 1970s, “The program which we are committed to...is likened to the ancient stupidity of pouring water on the drowning man.”<sup>81</sup>

This dissertation can also inform the development of youth-centered and youth-led policy-making processes – processes that include and engage young people in creating and implementing policies that impact their lives. As an alternative to the punitive and debilitating laws and practices that direct the operation of schools, juvenile and criminal justice systems, and other institutions, this dissertation specifically supports the development of social justice youth policy.<sup>82</sup> This form of urban youth policy directly addresses the political economies of urban communities and engages young people in working for social change.<sup>83</sup> According to Shawn Ginwright, Julio Cammarota and Pedro Noguera, scholars involved with producing research about young people and their communities have a responsibility to promote and contribute to social justice youth policy. “Our ultimate goal,” they write, “is to facilitate the creation of public policies that promote and support young people’s political agency so that they may challenge and transform the oppressive conditions impeding their healthy transition into adulthood.”<sup>84</sup> Academic researchers and advocates with a professed social justice agenda often follow the same pattern of those who shape regressive and punitive policies; they believe that they – adults – have all of the solutions. They exclude young people’s ideas as well as young people

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<sup>81</sup> Folsom Prisoners, “The Folsom Prisoners’ Manifesto,” in *If They Come In the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, ed. Angela Davis, Bettina Aptheker and the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners (New York: The Third Press, 1971), 63.

<sup>82</sup> Shawn Ginwright, Julio Cammarota, and Pedro Noguera, “Youth, Social Justice, and Communities: Toward a Theory of Urban Youth Policy,” *Social Justice* 32 no. 3 (2005).

<sup>83</sup> Shawn Ginwright, Julio Cammarota, and Pedro Noguera, “Youth, Social Justice, and Communities: Toward a Theory of Urban Youth Policy,” *Social Justice* 32 no. 3 (2005).

<sup>84</sup> Shawn Ginwright, Julio Cammarota, and Pedro Noguera, “Youth, Social Justice, and Communities: Toward a Theory of Urban Youth Policy,” *Social Justice* 32 no. 3 (2005).

themselves from policy analysis, development, implementation, and evaluation.

Ginwright, Cammarota and Noguera stress that youth policy created in this fashion is not social justice youth policy.

This dissertation directly contributes to the development of social justice youth policy by centering the ideas and insights of young people typically marginalized from public debates. It also aims to engender collective youth-centered and youth-led policymaking approaches by illuminating the processes by which youth have shaped and promoted analysis on the discourses and policies that impact their lives. My discussion of youths' perspectives also illuminates a more holistic approach to understanding violence against youth. This is an extremely important contribution because as Ginwright, Cammarota and Noguera argue, one of the primary barriers to shaping policies that "support rather than punish youth" is the failure of "policymakers to think comprehensively about the problem."<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately, our society has a poor track record when it comes to devising holistic public policies concerning complex social issues."<sup>86</sup> I do not contend that young people as a group are passive victims of violence and oppression. I also do not assert that the young people who I reference in this work have all of the answers or are not laden with their own blind spots. I do, however contend that young people have the right and ability to shape the policies that directly impact their lives. This research project demonstrates that youth have the capacity to facilitate positive personal and social transformation through the development and promotion of critical analysis. More specifically, it

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<sup>85</sup> Shawn Ginwright, Julio Cammarota, and Pedro Noguera, "Youth, Social Justice, and Communities: Toward a Theory of Urban Youth Policy," *Social Justice* 32 no. 3 (2005).

<sup>86</sup> Shawn Ginwright, Julio Cammarota, and Pedro Noguera, "Youth, Social Justice, and Communities: Toward a Theory of Urban Youth Policy," *Social Justice* 32 no. 3 (2005), 36

illuminates how young people have advanced their understandings in order to shape public discourse, ideology and policy on youth and violence. We can all benefit from learning about and building upon their praxis.

### *Structure*

In this chapter, I have provided a brief introduction to the dissertation's focus and the central problems and questions that I address in this work. I also reviewed key contributions and debates within youth culture studies that are relevant to this project. Lastly, I explained how this dissertation fills gaps in existing academic scholarship, informs public policy and can contribute to contemporary movements for safety and social justice. In chapter two of this dissertation, I delineate the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this project. I also discuss my own background and biases in relation to this work. Theoretically and methodologically, this dissertation draws from Black feminism and critical race theory. Chapter two illuminates how these bodies of theory and method shaped the form, process, focus, ideas, and outcomes of this research project. Both Black feminism and critical race theory are concerned with the intellectual traditions and discourses of marginalized groups.

Chapters three and four show how youth publicly articulate critical analysis of violence in climates of criminalization. In Chapter three, I discuss how Black youth used hip hop music in the 1980s and 90s to contest growing hysteria about "youth violence" and develop their own analysis of violence. Chapter four is a case study of a 2003-2004 organizing campaign in Washington, D.C. in which youth and adults worked together to successfully challenge regressive policy proposals that were

framed as a response to “youth violence.” I show how youth developed and employed an alternative discourse on youth and violence as a central component of their campaign. In chapter five, the last chapter of the dissertation, I summarize my research findings about how youth have advanced critical understandings of violence in climates of criminalization using cultural activism and community organizing. I also reflect on their analysis and discourses, illuminating their limitations. Finally, I consider additional questions and areas for further study and describe how youth and young adults in community organizations are working to answer these questions.

## Chapter 2: Framing the Project

### *Introduction*

*a poem for myself*

what time do the bus leave  
she think to ask  
musical like  
finding her tongue again

it had been stuck  
for so long  
solid  
heavy  
stiff  
as in thick white paste  
she had been lost  
unable to move  
her tongue like  
her people  
wonderin where her voice gone

feelin lonely and apart  
brother teasin why you talk like that  
talk like she forgot their own syllables  
talk like mouth forgot  
how to make its own agreements  
talk like sentences been lassoed and hijacked  
returned clipped, sharp, hard, standard  
language like a bird with cut wings  
without round song or heart beat  
without street rhythm or music  
without reflection

her tongue bound first in college  
then graduate school  
stitched it so tight  
laced her language with syntax  
she couldn't recognize in her  
people's laughter  
made her wonder who her people be  
anyway  
felt her class rise and widen like a pool around her feet  
a pool she couldn't swim through  
to reach the hood  
a pool of more than separation<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Johonna McCants, "a poem for myself," Unpublished poem, 2008.



By the time I came to graduate school, a college education in Columbia, Missouri had already done its work on my tongue. I lost my ability to switch between standardized English and lyrical, African-American speech patterns. My first year of graduate school did further damage to my voice. Amidst the glorification of words with many syllables and sentences the size of paragraphs, I lost my ability to simply and clearly communicate and I lost my love for writing. But even if I could produce work that non-academics could understand, I was assimilated into a circle that expected its members to make one another their primary audience. There seemed to be little patience for people like me who wanted to talk first and foremost to my people – whether they came through PhD programs, GED programs, or neither. Academia also taught me to separate my identities and hyphenate myself back together. Immersed in the language of scholarly writing and discourse, I learned that there was a difference between an “academic” and a “community member,” a “scholar” and an “activist,” an “author,” and an “artist.” Too bad for me, these were all parts of my identity. And, although you could reconnect these segments with a simple hyphen mark as in “scholar-activist,” it seemed that there was no room for a holistic sense of self that encompassed each component – not side-by-side, but overlapping. And thus, I split into pieces.

loose, split ends

falling all over the room

need to gather it up

wash it, braid it

make it whole again

Thankfully, there were some scholars that urged me to braid all of myself into my research and make my communities of origin the first audience of my scholarship. These scholars are the authors of Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory.

By Black feminist theory, I am referring to a tradition of critical analysis including theoretical insights and epistemologies primarily advanced in the academy by Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks, Joy James, and Patricia Hill Collins.<sup>88</sup> By Critical Race Theory, I am referring to a body of theories, beliefs and intellectual strategies primarily advanced in the academy by progressive legal scholars of color such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda, and Richard Delgado.<sup>89</sup> Initially drawn to them because they resonated with my own passions, I chose Critical Race Theory and Black feminist theory as frameworks for this project

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<sup>88</sup> Here, I am using Black feminist theory as synonymous with the intellectual tradition Patricia Hill Collins has termed, “U.S. Black feminist thought.” Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000). Outside of the academy, Black feminist thought is also advanced by Black feminist activists, artists, organizations, blogs, networks, and popular writers, as well as other sources of thought, action and reflection that constitute Black feminist movements. In “The Wellspring of Black Feminist Theory,” Linda Burnham of the Women of Color Resource Center cautions against locating the origins of Black feminist theory in academia. Burnham traces the key tenets of contemporary Black feminist thought including intersectionality to the Black women activists in the Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Scholars such as Kimberly Springer and Patricia Hill Collins have similarly traced the origins of Black feminist theory to Black feminist movements outside of academia as well as Black women who articulate grounded theory outside of explicitly activist or academic sites. Linda Burnham, “The Wellspring of Black Feminist Theory,” Women of Color Resource Center Working Paper Series, No. 1. 2001. Available online at: [http://www.coloredgirls.org/downloads/working\\_01.pdf](http://www.coloredgirls.org/downloads/working_01.pdf); Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968 – 1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>89</sup> The term, critical race theory has also been used as a synonym for critical race studies, a broad and expansive body of critical scholarship on race, racism and racialization. Typically, “critical race theory” used in this manner is not capitalized, whereas the formation of Critical Race Theory originating from the work of progressive legal scholars of color is capitalized. I follow this tradition in this chapter. Although originating from legal scholars, Critical Race Theory is regularly employed and further developed in additional disciplinary sites, particularly education and sociology. As Janet Tolulope Awokoya and Christine Clark explain, “Though CRT was, at its inception, a legal construct and instrument, its broad applicability to other areas of human interaction has led to its infusion into other academic disciplines and professional arenas. Educational theorists and practitioners, for instance, have employed CRT as a lens to investigate and critique curriculum development, teaching methodologies, school climate, and PK-12 as well as higher education policies that impact the educational experiences of minority youth. Likewise, sociologists have employed CRT as a lens to critique “traditional” sociological thought based on largely Eurocentrically-biased investigations of people of color. The main goal of CRT is to facilitate scholars and activists, and hybrid combinations of both, in developing and implementing ontological, epistemological, and axiomatic constructs through which to impact social, political, and cultural life from a race-based counter-hegemonic location.” Janet Tolulope Awokoya and Christine Clark, “Demystifying Cultural Theories and Practices: Locating Black Immigrant Experiences in Teacher Education Research,” *Multicultural Education* (2008): 52.

because of their shared focus on silenced stories and marginalized perspectives; attention to multiple, interlocking dimensions of identity and oppression; explicit critique of the state and capitalist political economy; and commitment to transformation at multiple levels. In this chapter, I discuss how Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory serve as analytical frames for this project. I also reveal how my identities and experiences serve as an additional lens through which I see and interpret—the lens of my location. The central question addressed in this chapter is: How do Black feminist theory, Critical Race Theory, and personal experience frame this project? To answer this question, I interlace discussions of Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory with autobiographical stories.

As theoretical frameworks, both Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory foreground themes of oppression, transformation and praxis.<sup>90</sup> Their intellectual strategies emphasize the construction and use of narratives that affirm the authority and expertise of members of Black communities.<sup>91</sup> They also call for

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<sup>90</sup> Charles R. Lawrence III, “Foreword: Who Are We? Why Are We Here? Doing Critical Race Theory in Hard Times,” in *Crossroads, Directions and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), xi – xxi; Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris, “Introduction: Battles Waged, Won and Lost: Critical Race Theory at the Turn of the Millennium,” in *Crossroads, Directions and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); Julie A. Su and Eric K. Yamamoto, “Critical Coalitions: Theory and Praxis,” in *Crossroads, Directions and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 379 – 392; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984). My discussion of Critical Race Theory centers on contemporary Critical Race Theory, particularly that which has been called a “a new Critical Race Theory,” Critical Race Theory scholarship published within the last ten years that foregrounds questions and concerns about social movements, discourse, praxis, democracy, knowledge production and social transformation. This work is especially highlighted in the anthology, *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, which I draw from extensively in this chapter. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris, ed., *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 2002.

<sup>91</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000); Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and*

scholars to discuss their identities and experiences within the research that they produce.<sup>92</sup> Theorizing the varied relationships among identity, power and knowledge, Black feminist and critical race scholars focus on promoting the stories and epistemologies of communities of color, challenging the hegemonic knowledge of social institutions and transforming common sense understandings of the world.<sup>93</sup>

Black feminist theory is a body of thought created by Black women that places Black women and other marginalized groups at the center of social and political analysis, addresses the inter-relationships among multiple dimensions of identity and oppression, and emphasizes the production of knowledge through experience, dialogue, and resistance.<sup>94</sup> Black feminists birthed the concept of intersectionality – the notion that our experiences are shaped by multiple, interlocking dimensions of identity and oppression.<sup>95</sup> These dimensions impact how other

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*Rights: Diary of a Mad Law Professor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Margaret Montoya, “Celebrating Racialized Legal Narratives,” in *Crossroads, Directions and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 243 – 250.

<sup>92</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000); Combahee River Collective. “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Feminist Theory Reader*, ed. Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2003), 164 – 171; Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, introduction to *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995), xiii – xxxii; Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “The First Decade: Critical Reflections, Or ‘A Foot in the Closing Door,’” in *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 9 – 31.

<sup>93</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000); Sumi Cho and Robert Westley, “Historicizing Critical Race Theory’s Cutting Edge,” in *Critical Race Theory: Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 32 – 70.

<sup>94</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>95</sup> Linda Burnham, “The Wellspring of Black Feminist Theory,” Women of Color Resource Center Working Paper Series, No. 1. 2001. Available online at: [http://www.coloredgirls.org/downloads/working\\_01.pdf](http://www.coloredgirls.org/downloads/working_01.pdf); Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968 – 1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of

dimensions are felt, and work together to structure the experiences of a given individual or community.<sup>96</sup> As a whole, Black feminist theory foregrounds the complex nature of oppression and the need for transformation on multiple levels – individual, interpersonal, and institutional.<sup>97</sup>

Critical Race Theory is a body of thought primarily created by progressive legal scholars of color that: places the perspectives and experiences of people of color at the center of legal and political discourse, addresses the persistent presence of institutional racism, and emphasizes the production of knowledge through the creation of stories rooted in personal experience and collective struggle.<sup>98</sup> One of Critical Race Theory’s primary contributions is the idea that white supremacist and patriarchal logics are imprinted and embedded in law and legal discourse.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, pursuing legal reform and policy change as a primary solution to harm and injustice is a flawed and misguided approach.<sup>100</sup> To foment substantial change, we

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Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, 139-167.

<sup>96</sup> Combahee River Collective. “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Feminist Theory Reader*, ed. Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2003), 164 – 171; Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, 139-167; Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

<sup>97</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>98</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, introduction to *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995), xiii – xxxii; Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “The First Decade: Critical Reflections, Or ‘A Foot in the Closing Door,’” in *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 9 – 31; Richard Delgado, introduction to *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995);

<sup>99</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, introduction to *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995), xiii – xxxii; Richard Delgado, introduction to *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995)

<sup>100</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, introduction to *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995), xiii – xxxii;

must unveil the oppressive understandings embedded in policy and law as well as social discourse more generally, while also working to create alternative systems outside of state institutions.<sup>101</sup> Critical race theorists also focus on the production of counter-stories, narratives that provide the alternative and critical understandings missing from dominant narratives and discourses.<sup>102</sup> They also embrace, build on and share many of the foundational tenets of Black feminist theory.<sup>103</sup> In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the perspectives afforded through Critical Race Theory and Black feminist theory in greater depth. I also alternate between discussions of these fields and narratives of personal experience.

### *Personal Identity and the Development of a Critical Consciousness*

My consciousness of who I am and how I understand the world is connected to my race, gender, age, nationality, ethnicity, class background, geographical location, and faith. Even more, my consciousness is shaped by the intersections of

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Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “The First Decade: Critical Reflections, Or ‘A Foot in the Closing Door,’” in *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 9 – 31; Richard Delgado, introduction to *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>101</sup> Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Isabelle Gunning, “Global Feminism at the Local Level: The Criminalization of Female Genital Surgeries,” in *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 337 – 344.

<sup>102</sup> Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Bronwyn T. Williams, “The Truth in the Tale: Race and Counterstorytelling in the Classroom,” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 48, no. 2 (2004): 164 – 169; Daniel Solarzano and Tarao Yosso, “Critical Race and Latcrit Theory and Method: Counter-storytelling,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 14, no. 4 (2001), 471 – 495.

<sup>103</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, introduction to *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995), xiii – xxxii. My discussion of Critical Race Theory also encompasses Critical Race Feminism, an offshoot of Critical Race Theory that specifically centers the concerns of women of color. Adrian Katherine Wing, introduction to *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

these and other dimensions of my identity. I am located in Blackness, in womanhood, heterosexuality, and African-American culture. I am located in what is best described as the suburban working-class – where just-getting-by meets living-in-the-suburbs-sometimes meets praying-to-meet-the-mortgage. I am located in Prince Georges, County, Maryland, a county famed for the highest number of wealthiest Blacks in the nation, and like its D.C. neighbor, stratified along class lines. I am located in family – a divorced mother and father and one living grandmother, a brother and sister, one niece and two nephews.

I am located in the Christian faith and a radical legacy of Black believers; in college classrooms, community forums, and youth organizations. I am an educator and a student, a teacher and a learner, a political activist and a cultural worker, an intellectual and an artist. I am located somewhere between young and old – often mistaken for a recent high school graduate though I have celebrated a 10 year high school reunion whereas some teenagers in my life call me old, though I am not yet 30. You will also find me among communities of West African immigrants, white progressive activists, and working-class youth organizers. I am a bridge-builder and a network center, member of movements and peddler of visions.<sup>104</sup>

My early political consciousness was especially shaped by the literary and performing arts. Reading was a common and popular activity in my family. When I finished all of the books I checked out from the public library, I scanned my mother's bookshelves for reading material – discovering Claude Brown's *Man Child in the Promised Land*, J.A. Rogers' *From Superman to Man*, and the *Autobiography of*

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<sup>104</sup> Sacks theorized the concept of a “network center” in relation to Black women's grassroots leadership. Karen Brodtkin Sacks, “Gender and Grassroots Leadership,” in *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, ed. Anne Bookman and Sandra Morgen (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

*Angela Davis*, among other classic literature. After participating in a poetry slam for teenage poets at my local library, the host, Gayle Danley, took me and the two other champions to an open mic poetry night held at a café in the U Street Corridor of D.C. I quickly became a regular. Most of the performers and audience members were African-Americans in their 20s and 30s who shared poems, rhymes, lyrics, raps, or simply rhythmic words. I was often the youngest person in the room. The poems and songs I heard and the books I read were my primary source of information on politics, history, culture and current events. The words were like water to my growing consciousness, rooted in the rich soil of Blackness and African-American identity.

I acquired a more global perspective at the age of 15 as a result of my first sojourn outside of the United States. I applied for and received a scholarship to spend six weeks in Brazil during the summer after my first year of high school. In Brazil, I became aware of a new dimension of my identity – nationality. For the first time, I was not only Black or African-American. I was an American. From conversations with my Brazilian peers, I became aware of the U.S. government’s history of violent interventions around the world and was ashamed at how ignorant I was of even government policies within the United States. I also became painfully aware of my lack of awareness of cultures outside of my own. I returned to the United States with a conviction that I had been lied to and under-educated – through my high school classes, through the news media, and through the everyday messages that I was imparted throughout life. I wanted more people to experience the paradigm shift that I felt within, but knew that opportunities like the one I had were rare. Thus, I dedicated my life to serving as a living bridge between cultures and communities. I decided to



pursue a career in journalism and additional travel opportunities as a result of that promise to myself.<sup>105</sup>

My engagement in community activism and teaching at an early age further broadened the limits of my thinking. During my last year of high school, my friend, Seshat, who I met on the open mic scene invited a group of poets and musicians to work with her on a project. Her idea was to bring poetry and music to poor D.C. neighborhoods as a means to increase literacy among children and adults. After a few planning meetings in her apartment, which was located right off of U Street, we held scheduled and impromptu performances and workshops in the community spaces of housing projects and outside of apartment buildings. A staff member of the D.C. Housing Authority who especially appreciated our efforts invited our group to serve as teachers in a new summer program for teenagers who lived in D.C.'s public housing. I was hired as part of the instructional staff and began teaching high school students two months after my own graduation from high school in 1998. We taught basic math and reading along with leadership and job skills using the arts and other hands-on teaching methods. At the end of my first summer teaching for the D.C. Housing Authority, I left Maryland to attend college at the University of Missouri-Columbia, where I would earn degrees in Journalism and Interdisciplinary Studies, the latter through an emphasis in Black Studies. Throughout my life, my experiences and convictions have served as a steering wheel in my pursuit of knowledge. I came to Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory as a result of the same process.

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<sup>105</sup> Since my first trip out of the United States to Brazil, I have been blessed to spend time in Canada for six weeks, Cuba for one week, Ghana for four months, and Kenya for three weeks. I have also visited England, France, Switzerland, Germany, and Togo. My experiences abroad provided me with a global worldview and transnational sense of identity. Each time I left the United States, I learned more about myself in the world.

## *Goals and Strategies of Black Feminist and Critical Race Theory*

Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory articulate the experiences and perspectives of Black women and communities of color at large through storytelling, criticism and analysis concerned with oppression, transformation, and praxis. In this section, I identify and elaborate on the objectives and strategies employed by Black feminist and critical race theorists. In summary, Black feminist and critical race scholars produce intellectual work to critique dominant understandings and discourses and to construct new ideas and strategies for analysis and action. They use a variety of intellectual strategies such as storytelling to incite critical analysis and transformative action. Many of the same intellectual strategies opened my consciousness and I regularly employ them as an artist, activist and educator. At the end of this section, I discuss how I apply these goals and strategies within this dissertation.

### *Critique*

Like all critical theorists, Black feminist and critical race scholars maintain a focus on cogent critique. Black feminist theory began in large part with a critique of the erasure of Black women in Black liberation and white feminist movements, and the absence of Black feminist thought within scholarly and popular discourse.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, Critical Race Theory was developed through a critique of liberalism and reformist tendencies in civil rights jurisprudence and the race-deficient analysis of critical legal studies, a movement led by white legal scholars exposing the political

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<sup>106</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984); Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 337 – 359.

nature of law.<sup>107</sup> Though Black feminist and critical race theories differ in their foundational critiques, they share an emphasis on three main sites of critique: critique of hegemony, critique of power relations, and critique of marginalization.

*Hegemony:* In critical theory, hegemony refers to the process of securing and maintaining domination through the control of ideas and beliefs, rather than the singular use of violent force.<sup>108</sup> Through the hegemonic process, logics of oppression – which operate as neutral, unbiased knowledge – are embedded in institutions and refracted through culture.<sup>109</sup> According to Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins, “Knowledge is a vitally important part of the social relations of domination and resistance. By objectifying African-American women and recasting our experiences to serve the interests of elite white men, much of the Eurocentric masculinist worldview fosters Black women’s subordination.”<sup>110</sup> Black feminist and critical race scholars critique these worldviews and their impacts on communities.<sup>111</sup> Critical race theorists focus especially on unmasking these logics as they exist in the law. Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, has written that the founding goal of Critical Race Theory was “to understand how laws contributed to the systematic disempowerment of African Americans” and to understand how legal rules function

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<sup>107</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, introduction to *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995), xiii – xxxii

<sup>108</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12 – 13.

<sup>109</sup> Louis Althusser. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

<sup>110</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 221.

<sup>111</sup> Andrea Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing,” in *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*, ed. Incite Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge: South End Press, 2006).

in a racist world.<sup>112</sup> Black feminist and critical race theorists' critiques of hegemonic knowledge also address issues of language, epistemology, and discourse.

*Power Relations:* Hegemony not only impacts how people understand the world, but also how we relate to one another. Oppression is not only reflected in institutions, but also interpersonal relationships. Although many theoretical frameworks such as poststructuralist theory attend to power relations between dominant institutions and marginalized communities, Black feminist and Critical Race Theory also address power relations within marginalized communities and the need to examine our own consciousness. Speaking at a Critical Race Theory conference, law professor Charles Lawrence asserted, "We have struggled to teach one another about the intersections that gender and race and heterosexism make and to confront our own internalization and participation in these subordinations."<sup>113</sup> Lawrence's remarks addressed institutional, interpersonal, and internalized oppression as the concerns of critical race theorists.

As an example of this multi-level critique of power relations, a group of Black feminist scholars organized a grassroots campaign called, "African American Women in Defense of Ourselves" in 1991. The campaign, which evolved into an ad-hoc organization of Black women, was a response to the treatment of attorney Anita Hill during the confirmation hearings of now-Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. It was also a response to the silencing of Black women's experiences of violence in

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<sup>112</sup> Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "The First Decade: Critical Reflections, Or 'A Foot in the Closing Door,'" in *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 12

<sup>113</sup> Charles Lawrence, "Foreword: Who Are We? And Why Are We Here? Doing Critical Race Theory in Hard Times," in *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), xvii

mainstream America and Black communities. Organizers Elsa Barkley Brown, Barbara Ransby, and Deborah King published an advertisement signed by over 1600 Black women in *The New York Times* and six Black newspapers. The ad criticized the mainstream media for their distortion of African-American voices, as well as the dismissal of Black women's experiences of sexual harassment and abuse.<sup>114</sup> This action exemplifies critique of power relations, as well as marginalization.

*Marginalization:* Marginalization is a process of exclusion, alienation, and ostracism. Black feminist and critical race theorists recognize the existence of marginalized groups, marginalized individuals, marginalized knowledge, and marginalized stories. We critique this marginalization by not only calling it out, but also by validating and promoting the analysis of marginalized communities. The concept of “subjugated knowledge” plays a central role in critical race and Black feminist critiques of marginalization.<sup>115</sup> This term refers to bodies of thought that are not accepted as valid and are devalued as a source of knowledge. Legal scholars Sumi Cho and Robert Westley, have argued that “subjugated knowledge challenges unitary theories from both the right and the left that purport to offer a totalizing picture of

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<sup>114</sup> Barbara Ransby, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Deborah King, “African American Women In Defense of Ourselves,” in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform and Renewal: An African American Anthology*, ed. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2000) 589-590; Becky Thompson, “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 337 – 359.

<sup>115</sup> Michel Foucault defined subjugated knowledges as firstly, “blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked,” and secondly, “a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as ...insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity.” Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures” in *Power-Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977.*, ed. C. Gordon (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1980) 78-108.

how societies are ordered.”<sup>116</sup> Cho and Westley emphasize the illumination and promotion of knowledge produced through political struggles.

The notions of “stock stories,” and “counter-stories,” are conceptual critiques of marginalization that feature prominently in Critical Race Theory. Stock stories are narratives that mirror the master narrative, reflect hegemonic knowledge, and have become normalized throughout society. As defined by Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, “stock stories are those ways of explaining and interpreting the world that embody received understandings and meanings.”<sup>117</sup> Counter-stories are new narratives intentionally created to subvert, challenge, and debunk stock stories.<sup>118</sup> A team of teacher educators at Barnard College have elaborated on this theoretical framework by adding the concepts of “concealed stories,” and “resistance stories.”

According to Lee Anne Bell et al,

Concealed stories coexist alongside the stock stories but most often remain in the shadows, hidden from public view. Though invisible to those in the dominant society, concealed stories are often circulated, told and retold by people in the margins whose experiences and aspirations they express and honor, and they provide a perspective that is often very different from that of the mainstream. Through such stories people who are marginalized, and often stigmatized by, the dominant society recount their experiences and critique or “talk back” to the mainstream narratives, telling stories of struggle, self-affirmation, and survival in the face of oppressive circumstances. ...

Resistance stories ...are stories, both historical and contemporary, that tell about how people have resisted racism, challenged the stock

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<sup>116</sup> Sumi Cho and Robert Westley, “Historicizing Critical Race Theory’s Cutting Edge,” in *Crossroads, New Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*,” ed. by Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 49-50.

<sup>117</sup> Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 35.

<sup>118</sup> Lee Anne Bell et al, “The Storytelling Project Curriculum: Learning about Race and Racism through Storytelling and the Arts,” (New York: Barnard College, 2008).

stories that support it, and fought for more equal and inclusive social arrangements.<sup>119</sup>

In order to create a counter-story, criticalists unearth concealed stories, accounts that challenge the perspective and truth of stock stories, and build on resistance stories, accounts of resistance to oppression and marginalization.<sup>120</sup> A critical awareness of stock stories, concealed stories, and resistance stories enables a thorough critique of dominant scripts and the creation of new understandings, or counter-stories.

### ***Construct***

Unlike those critical theorists who see critique as their sole purpose, Black feminist and critical race scholars are committed to constructing new bodies of knowledge. This is an especially significant goal because although critique reveals problems with hegemonic knowledge, the absence of new intellectual formations leaves the same knowledge regime in place. Black feminist and critical race scholars focus especially on creating and promoting three different kinds of understandings – epistemologies (ways of knowing), theories (guiding ideas and explanations), and intellectual strategies (processes of communicating ideas and explanations). Each of these kinds of understandings is significant for the promotion of critical thought and praxis.

*Epistemology:* Black feminist and critical race theorists have written a great deal on epistemologies of experience – ways of knowing that are located within our

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<sup>119</sup> Lee Anne Bell et al, “The Storytelling Project Curriculum: Learning about Race and Racism through Storytelling and the Arts,” (New York: Barnard College, 2008), 8 – 9.

<sup>120</sup> Lee Anne Bell et al, “The Storytelling Project Curriculum: Learning about Race and Racism through Storytelling and the Arts,” (New York: Barnard College, 2008); Rosemary Roberts, Lee Anne Bell and Brett Murphy, “Flipping the Script: Analyzing Youth Talk about Race and Racism,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2008).

life histories, collective memories, and community struggles.<sup>121</sup> Patricia Hill Collins is one of the central theorists of Black feminist epistemology. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins articulated the predominance of experience to Black feminist methods of arriving at knowledge:

Living life as an African-American woman is a necessary prerequisite for producing Black feminist thought because within Black women's communities thought is validated and produced with reference to a particular set of historical, material, and epistemological conditions. African-American women who adhere to the idea that claims about Black women must be substantiated by Black women's sense of experiences and who anchor our knowledge claims in an Afrocentric feminist epistemology have produced a rich tradition of Black feminist thought.<sup>122</sup>

Collins goes on to name "blues singers, poets, autobiographers, storytellers, and orators," as Black women valued by other everyday Black women as experts on our experience.<sup>123</sup>

Critical Race Theory shares this attention to experience, particularly through the use of storytelling. This epistemological approach is connected to the development of counter-discourses that reflect the experiences of oppressed and silenced communities.<sup>124</sup> Critical race theorists also employ fictional narratives to summarize and represent collective experiences or to starkly illuminate social

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<sup>121</sup> These discussions are (also) especially prominent within Black feminist and decolonized approaches to anthropology. Irma McClaurin, ed. *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Faye Harrison, ed. *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology of Liberation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Arlington, Va: Association of Black Anthropologists, American Association of Anthropologists, 1997).

<sup>122</sup> Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 221.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Sumi Cho and Robert Westley, "Historicizing Critical Race Theory's Cutting Edge," in *Crossroads, New Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. by Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 50.; Julie Su and Eric Yamamoto, "Critical Coalitions: Theory and Praxis" in *Crossroads, New Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. by Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 381



conditions and questions through the use of hyperbole and metaphor.<sup>125</sup> One example of the latter is Professor Derrick Bell's famous parable of the space traders.<sup>126</sup> In the story, aliens from outer space visit the United States loaded with gold, special earth-restorative chemicals, and safe nuclear engine and fuel. They promise to give the U.S. these resources in exchange for the entire Black population. The U.S. government, with massive white support, decides to make the trade, though white corporations side against the exchange because of the money they would lose with Blacks absent. Based on the historical experience of the African slave trade and enduring experiences of white supremacy, Bell's parable serves to question how much has truly changed, using an intellectual strategy that powerfully captures the attention of people with various perspectives on this question. Black feminist and critical race scholars use stories as sources of knowledge, as part of the development of theory, and as a primary intellectual strategy.

*Theory:* Black feminist and critical race theorists develop explanations and concepts that provide vital understandings of society. In fact, this construction of theory is at the center of their work. For Black feminist and critical race scholars, the significance of theory is inextricably tied to our need for systems of knowledge that dismantle hegemonic logics and facilitate emancipatory practices. Legal scholar Elizabeth Iglesias elucidates this need in her article on global markets and racialized economies:

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<sup>125</sup> Legal scholar Derrick Bell's collection of fictional stories, *And We Are Not Saved* (1987) is an early and notable example. Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

<sup>126</sup> Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 158 – 194.

[A]ny emancipatory achievements will remain profoundly unstable until the legally constructed institutions of white supremacy and the anti-democratic institutions of the anti-political economy are replaced with a new order of knowledge and power.<sup>127</sup>

Iglesias contends that “the problems of institutionalizing an alternative order of knowledge and power...being both structural and conceptual, require the kind of structural and conceptual reforms that are generated only and through the production of theory.”<sup>128</sup> According to critical race scholars Sumi Cho and Robert Westley, the theory produced must be coherent, relevant and explanatory in relation to “specific movement histories and actual power struggles [as well as the] lived experience of people of color.” Developing new ways of seeing and interpreting is fundamental to the construction of strategies for resistance and transformation.

In addition to developing original theories and concepts, Black feminist and critical race scholars delineate theories embedded in sites of oppositional knowledge. Barbara Christian has explained this goal in reference to her own Black feminist criticism:

My folk, in other words, have always been in a race for theory – though more in the form of a hieroglyph, a written form which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative. In my own work I try to illuminate and explain these hieroglyphs, which is, I think, an activity quite different from the creating of the hieroglyphs themselves. As the Buddhists would say, the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Elizabeth M. Iglesias, “Global Markets, Racial Spaces, and the Role of Critical Race Theory in the Struggle for Community Control of Movements: An Institutional Class Analysis,” in *Crossroads, New Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. by Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 318-319.

<sup>128</sup> Elizabeth M. Iglesias, “Global Markets, Racial Spaces, and the Role of Critical Race Theory in the Struggle for Community Control of Movements: An Institutional Class Analysis,” in *Crossroads, New Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. by Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 317-318.

<sup>129</sup> Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 12.

The goal of excavating and explaining existing theory is also manifested in critical race scholars' illumination of counter-discourses, which include concepts, theories, and ideologies that diverge from mainstream and normative worldviews. According to Cho and Westley,

“The search for subjugated knowledge ... manifests a synergistic approach to critical theorizing, while the ahistorical pursuit of the “theoretical” represents an abdication of political engagement and the relinquishing of the full promise of antisubordinationist intellectual production.”<sup>130</sup>

Scholars construct and communicate this theorizing using a variety of strategies.

*Intellectual Strategies:* The theorizing practiced by Black feminist and critical race scholars is embedded in the intellectual traditions of Black women, Black communities, and communities of color. Within these traditions, knowledge is created and shared through didactic prose as well as more artistic forms such as poetry and story. Narrative strategies play an especially important role in the construction and dissemination of analysis. The process of framing a story is itself an analytical process, which involves theoretically-driven and theory-producing choices such as whose voices and perspectives to include within the story, how to represent the causes of the story's events, and the language and terminology in which the story is told.

Legal scholar Margaret Montoya suggests that,

Narratives invoke the right of the subordinated person to narrate – to interpret events in opposition to the dominant narratives and to reinvent one's self by bringing coherence to one's life stories. .... Outsider stories, often freighted with the emotions of marginality and the agony of the social pariah have

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<sup>130</sup> Sumi Cho and Robert Westley, “Historicizing Critical Race Theory's Cutting Edge,” in *Crossroads, New Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*,” ed. by Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 51.

dialectical and epistemological features that distinguish them from the stock stories of the dominant culture.<sup>131</sup>

As an intellectual strategy, storytelling challenges hegemonic epistemologies that associate the production of knowledge with scientific processes and the communication of analysis with pedantic formats. The telling of stories also makes it easy to place events, institutions, and ideas within their historical and political contexts, and connect the multiple and intersecting dimensions of social life.

While minimized or neglected within Eurocentric epistemologies, the emotional and spiritual impacts of intellectual strategies are recognized and valued within the work of Black feminist scholars and the field of Critical Race Theory.

Barbara Christian is often quoted from her article, “A Race for Theory,” as stating:

For people of color have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking.<sup>132</sup>

However, she also follows up this last sentence to ask, “How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?”<sup>133</sup> Here, Christian is pointing out that creative and narrative and creative strategies of knowledge production not only generate theory, but also facilitate healing. Black feminist and critical race scholars have realized that

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<sup>131</sup> Margaret Montoya, “Celebrating Racialized Legal Narratives,” in *Crossroads, Directions and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 245.

<sup>132</sup> Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 12.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

a science of oppression that does not challenge the “spirit injury” of oppression falls far short of the science we need.<sup>134</sup>

*Application:* I apply the goals and strategies of Critical Race Theory and Black feminist theory to this dissertation by a dual focus on critique and construction, the use of innovative intellectual strategies, and attention to marginalized groups and marginalized knowledge. Both Black feminist and critical race theorists wield critiques of hegemonic knowledge, including language, epistemology and discourse. In like fashion, this dissertation unmasks how everyday discourse on youth and violence sustains repressive understandings and the continuation of violence against youth. Black feminist and critical race scholars are also deeply invested in the construction and promotion of alternative epistemologies, theories, and intellectual strategies. This dissertation emphasizes how youth have created their own critical understandings of violence as well as the strategies by which they have constructed and promoted these understandings in the public area. Secondly, I use a contextual methodology to locate youths’ stories and discourses within a dominant climate of criminalization and the discourses that characterize that climate. Lastly, this dissertation is attentive to multiple dimensions of marginalization and oppression, as well as multiple, overlapping and contentious sites of marginalized knowledge.

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<sup>134</sup> According to Adrien Katherine Wing, “spirit injury is a Critical Race Feminist term that contemplates the psychological, spiritual, and cultural effects of multiple assaults ..” The concept of “spirit injury” is central to Critical Race Feminist conceptualizations of violence as well as the impacts of oppression broadly. Adrien Katherine Wing, “A Critical Race Feminist Conceptualization of Violence: South African and Palestinian Women,” in *Global Critical Race Feminism: An International Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 333. Wing’s theorization of “spirit injury” builds on Patricia Williams’ concept of “spirit murder.” Patricia Williams, “Spirit-Murdering the Messenger: The Discourse of Fingerpointing as the Law’s Response to Racism,” *University of Miami Law Review* 42, 127 – 151.

Critical race theorists are especially noted for the use of fictional narratives as a central feature of their epistemology, while Black feminist scholars have directed special emphasis to the predominance of experience. I employ both of these epistemological insights in this work. My analysis of the fictional stories told by Black youth in hip hop music interprets these narratives as concealed stories, stories told by people in marginalized groups that exist alongside stock stories and contest the analysis and messages of stock stories. I also present a resistance story – the story of a community organizing campaign in which youth developed and employed an alternative discourse of youth and violence in order to prevent a package of punitive policies and lift up an alternative vision of youth safety and justice. Lastly, I consider how concealed stories told by youth through hip hop as well as resistance stories of youth and intergenerational organizing campaigns pave the way for the construction of new counter-stories on youth and violence.

### *Experiences of Violence*

College brought me a range of new experiences. I met white students who had never seen Black people in person before and I co-founded an organization for Black women on campus. I also experienced threats to my safety and encountered the loss of a close friend to violence. The event that most shattered my personal sense of safety was my experience with virulent expressions of white supremacy. During my freshman year of college, my only year in the dormitories, I awoke one morning to find “KKK” written on the dry erase board attached to the outside of my dorm room door. And, in the photograph on my door that pictured my white roommate and I side-by-side, my face had been colored in with a Black marker. I did not come out of

my room for days, afraid that “KKK” and a Blacked-out face were not merely the scribbles of drunk, white kids who came in late one night with nothing to do, but a threat to hurt me issued by angry white frat boys. My all-female dormitory was located nearby white fraternity and sorority houses and I had heard that the frat house across the street was known for its anti-Black racism.

Shortly before the incident at my dorm, I had hosted a poetry reading in the middle of the main student union - outside the safety of the Black Student Union where we, Black students, typically shared our creative work. My friend Candice – who went by the name, Kendeke at the time – shared her most popular poem. It began, “If Amerika-ka-ka don’t come around, we gonna burn this mothafucka down...” As Kendeke lived off campus, I thought for sure *they* had come after me in retaliation for her fiery words. I had no idea that about a year later someone would take my friend, Candice’s life – but it would not be white people at all.

I studied abroad in Ghana in the fall of 1999, the first semester of my sophomore year of college. Since I was off campus the fall semester and would have had a hard time finding housing when I returned, my friend, Roselyn invited me to move in to her two-bedroom apartment for the spring semester. Late one night in March 2000, Roselyn yelled for me to come into her room. Someone had just called to tell us that our friend, Candice, was found dead in her apartment. In the weeks to come, we would find out that her boyfriend had killed her by suffocating her with a pillow. After killing her, he left for Florida, where he was later found by the police and charged with murder. When the news broke, the stories came out. “I heard him cuss her out in the middle of the Black Studies Department,” is one I still vividly

remember. And my story? When I came back from Ghana, I learned that Candice had changed her name and religion again – to Arabia and the Five Percent Nation to match the religion of her new boyfriend.<sup>135</sup> I also noticed that Candice was not around as often as she used to be and seemed somewhat reserved when I did see her – always accompanied by her boyfriend.

Why didn't we gather and put our stories together before she was killed? How could we so easily lose track of someone who was apart of our community? Candice's body was in her apartment for several days before anyone knew she was dead. It was only after her neighbors smelled her body that someone called the police to investigate. I vowed to myself and others that I would intervene in violence when it happened around me, and that the "mind your own business" attitude would have to die before someone else's friend, daughter or sister did. Yes, someone had called the police when they heard the sounds of a fight from the apartment, or perhaps just the sound of my friend screaming in pain. The police came and Candice assured them she was okay, I guess; I am really not sure what happened at that point. But we do know what happened after the police officers left. Her boyfriend suffocated her and she died. Although I never knew her boyfriend, I do not believe he meant to kill her. My theory is that he put the pillow on her face to drown out her screams and kept it there for far too long. But whether it was accidental or intentional, my friend is dead and I think there was more that her neighbors and those of us loved her could have done to save her life. Candace, my brilliant, caring, and fiery friend, was set to graduate after only three years of college. In fact, she was scheduled to graduate at the end of the

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<sup>135</sup> Candace first changed her name to Kendeke and converted from Christianity to Rastafarianism after becoming involved with a Rastafarian brother who lived in town.



semester in which she was murdered. A few months following her death, just around the time of her would-be graduation, I encountered patriarchal violence once again.

I spent the summer following my second year of college in Columbia, Missouri in order to take an intensive journalism class. More like a job than a course, Reporting required news-editorial students to serve as reporters for the *Columbia Missourian*, a daily newspaper for the city of Columbia owned by the university. Before the summer term started, I moved out of my friend, Roselyn's apartment and into a one-room studio located close to campus – my first place all to myself. My friend, Terence, helped me move all of my belongings into the small one-room space. The next day, my friend Monique helped me unpack and run to Super-Walmart for groceries. It was around midnight when we came back from the grocery run and my friend had to rush home. She quickly helped me to carry my bags inside then left me in the hallway in my small apartment building to carry them into my apartment.

My neighbor (I think his name was Greg), who I had met while moving in the day before, came out of his apartment next door to mine just as I finished bringing the last bags inside my apartment. He leaned against my door frame and we exchanged small talk while I put my groceries away. Among other casual topics, we talked about music and he told me he wanted to play a song for me in his apartment. Eager to meet my neighbors and naively trusting of other Black people in particular, I followed him next door to his one-room studio and sat down on the bed, the only piece of sitting furniture in the room. Greg sat down beside me and began to fool with the stereo next to his bed. I don't remember if he ever played the song or what song he was going to play. But I remember he first tried to hug me before forcing me down

on the bed with his body as he searched under his mattress for what I imagined was a gun or condoms, or both. I never found out.

Immediately, I began screaming out prayers. “Jesus, please get this man off of me!” “God, please help me!” “Don’t let him rape me!” “God, please take control!” Mentally planning resistance in my dorm room during my freshman year one evening, I had asked myself what I would do if I was ever attacked. After going through a series of options in my head – from fighting back to reasoning with my assailant – I had settled on praying out loud because I strongly believed in the power of prayer as well as the fear of God. After immeasurable but brief moments of shouted prayer as Greg trapped me underneath him, my strategy worked, God intervened, and my neighbor got off of me. He insisted that I verbally agree with him that nothing had happened before letting me out of his apartment. I ran back to mine and locked the door, thanking God for my escape.

I immediately began calling the few friends who were still in town and finally reached Terence who came and picked me up so I could stay at his place. It wasn’t until the following day that I went back to my apartment and called the police. Thinking about racial profiling and stereotypes of the Black male criminal, I hated not being able to give the white, female police officer who came to take my statement more than a general description of the thirty-something Black man who lived right next door and tried to rape me. She told me if I chose to file charges, he wouldn’t be charged with more than the lightest degree of assault since he didn’t succeed in raping me or leave any visible signs of force on my body. Sandwiched between two enemies, my assailant and the criminal legal system, I didn’t pursue prosecution. It

was not just that I was afraid that Greg would find me and try to hurt me again. More so, I was already convinced that filing a statement, meeting with a lawyer, and going to a trial would be a waste of time that I did not have and that would not end in protection for me and other women. Furthermore, I felt that locking Greg up for the short time that an assault conviction might bring would not address his problem or dissuade him for trying to rape someone else. I reported the situation to the landlord, a white man, and he left me out of the lease, but Greg remained in the building. Terence also led a group of brothers over to Greg's apartment to talk to him, but he was never home each time they stopped by.

After living at Terence's place for about a week, I spent several weeks at a mentor's home before finally finding another apartment I could afford that was not too far from campus. My new place was only two blocks away from the apartment building where I was assaulted. Later that summer, an older white woman who lived downstairs tracked my number down and left a message on my answering machine: "Did something happen between you and Greg? . . . because, he raped me." I called her back and told her I would come right over. Unlike my situation, Greg was a "friend" of hers. He would come over to hang out in her and her boyfriend's apartment. Greg was visiting one afternoon when her boyfriend called to say that he was coming home from work late. It was that evening that Greg raped her. In person, I talked with her, prayed with her and grieved with her, but I still don't have the words to adequately unravel the tangled knot of my feelings. Although I had yet to meet any of my neighbors outside of Greg, I still wished that I had let all of the women in the apartment know what happened, or returned to stick home-made flyers

about my assault under all of the doors. But, I did not think any of that until I heard from the woman downstairs. So now, these ideas and stories are life lessons – reflections in the cycle of praxis.

### *Core Beliefs of Black Feminist and Critical Race Theory*

Although my earlier discussion connected Critical Race Theory to Black feminist theory as a whole, the ideas, practices, and commitments of Critical Race Theory are most similar to the radical currents of Black feminist theory. Radical Black feminists are committed to a broad agenda of human freedom that not only addresses the material conditions of Black women, but all members of Black communities.<sup>136</sup> In fact, as historian Robin Kelley has pointed out, “they are the theorists and proponents of a radical humanism committed to liberating humanity and reconstructing social relations across the board.”<sup>137</sup> Whereas most liberal Black feminist scholarship is singularly concerned with the fate of Black women, radical Black feminists regularly produce scholarship on a variety of subjects and communities.

I have often shed tears while reading critical race and radical Black feminist scholarship because I am so excited and moved to see my beliefs and passions written across the pages. Radical Black feminists and critical race theorists provide a coherent and explicit critique of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and the state. We understand that the state is the chief architect of oppression and violence,

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<sup>136</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms*. (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1997), 22.

<sup>137</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 137.

which gives itself the license and authority to commit violence without fear of redress.<sup>138</sup> Oppression and violence are written into the rules of the state. With this in mind, critical race theorists and radical Black feminists are united in their rejection of liberal reformist agendas. Our goal as agents of social change is not reform, but fundamental transformation of society and ourselves.<sup>139</sup> Rather than narrowly looking to policy makers and institutional policies for answers, we believe that our communities have an enormous and infinite capacity to create liberatory solutions.

In an earlier section of this chapter, I discussed the goals and strategies of Critical Race Theory and Black feminist theory and provided a discussion of my application of these goals and strategies in the latter part of the section. Here, I integrate a discussion of the core beliefs of critical race and Black feminist theory, with an explanation of my own application and contributions. For me, the themes that most capture the concerns of radical Black feminist and critical race scholars are oppression, transformation and praxis. Black feminist and critical race scholars are united in their attention to multiple dimensions of oppression that exist on multiple levels. They also provide a framework for conceptualizing and working toward fundamental transformation. This framework includes an emphasis on praxis, a concept that links theory and action. I will organize the rest of my discussion around these themes.

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<sup>138</sup> I define the state as the government and its official or unofficial caretakers including the police, military and courts. Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender and Race in U.S. Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

<sup>139</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 1989); Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

*Oppression:* Multiple systems of oppression are engrained in the foundation of our society and culture. These systems of oppression include white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, capitalism, and adultism.<sup>140</sup> Systems of oppression are systems of power that reflect how institutional power is organized in society.<sup>141</sup> But, they are also systems of value that reflect who is deemed most valuable and less valuable in a given culture.<sup>142</sup> Adultism is rarely recognized as a system of oppression and scholars who write about issues of oppression tend to exclude this form. Adultism is a system that accords power and value to adults at the expense of young people. I first learned about adultism when I began working with Justice for D.C. Youth, an intergenerational community organizing coalition. Adults were taught to recognize and challenge their own adultism, while youth learned how to identify and challenge the adultism that they experience from teachers, elected officials and even adult members of the organization. According to John Bell, one of the most cited experts on adultism:

Other “isms” like racism and sexism are well established and accepted as realities. They each have a huge body of literature and research documenting the effects and history of the oppression. There are novels, movies, media presentations, political organizations, and social movements devoted to illuminating and or eliminating the existence of the “ism.” The concept of adultism, the systematic mistreatment and disrespect of young people, is relatively new and has not been widely accepted as a reality. There is certainly much research and literature on children and youth, but very little that

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<sup>140</sup> While capitalism is indeed a political-economic system; it is also a system of power and a system of value. In capitalist societies, people with more capital are deemed and treated more valuable than people without it. They are also accorded more institutional power. For example, they are given more rights, more freedoms, more control, and more governance. In contrast, people with little to no capital are designated as those to be controlled and governed.

<sup>141</sup> In this study, I use the terms racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and adultism to refer to the interpersonal manifestations of these systems of oppression. These manifestations are the result of what happens when individuals internalize and act out these values in their relationships with other people and even in relation to themselves.

<sup>142</sup> People seen as most valuable are deemed worthy of life, respect and dignity whereas those seen as less valuable (or not valuable) are not deemed worthy of respect, dignity, and even life itself.

concludes that young people are an oppressed group in our society, with parallels to other such groups.”<sup>143</sup>

Unlike other studies on youth that fail to recognize adultism, this study recognizes its existence alongside the many other dimensions of oppression that Black youth face.

The intersectionality of oppression, or what Patricia Hill Collins has termed the “matrix of domination” is a guiding idea in Black feminist and Critical Race Theory.<sup>144</sup> This idea allows us to understand that Black youth face multiple systems of oppression and each system shapes how they experience the others. For example, a young person’s race, class, and gender impact her experience of adultism. In the United States, young people of color experience more brutal impacts of adultism than white youth because of how adultism operates in relation to white supremacy. Youths’ class, gender, and sexuality further impact their experiences of adultism as well as every other dimension of oppression that impacts their lives. In order to incorporate an intersectional analysis of youths’ identities and experiences, I grapple with the multiple systems of oppression that young people face, engage, and challenge in their every day lives.

Oppression is maintained through an unholy trinity comprised of the state, social structures and dominant understandings. The existence of this nexus of oppression and violence is a significant core belief that frames this project. Isabel Gunning’s scholarship on female genital surgeries provides a useful example of how this understanding informs anti-violence theory and practice. In “Global Feminism at the Local Level: The Criminalization of Female Genital Surgeries,” she expresses her

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<sup>143</sup> John Bell. “Understanding Adultism. A Major Obstacle to Developing Positive Youth-Adult Relationships” (Sommerville, Mass.: YouthBuild USA, March 1995), 2

<sup>144</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000)

unease at using the law as a tool or repressive symbol to protect women of color. Gunning describes a legislative effort in which a multiracial group of women successfully lobbied for a law to ban female genital surgeries in their jurisdiction. Proponents of the law conceived it largely as a symbolic measure of opposition to the practice of female genital surgeries. After the law was passed, African immigrant families began to experience increased violations by the state and other institutions. For example, doctors began to perform genital examinations on African children even when they came in to be seen for a sore throat. Gunning decries the absence of African women's input and the decision to pass criminal legislation rather than institute a health or educational program that could bring about progressive change.

Gunning also uses this example to critique the absence of attention to the language of law and discourse and the use of criminalization as a preferred and primary approach for addressing social problems in the United States. Gunning points to the often unintended results of law to warn against using law to improve the lives of women of color. The central question, according to Gunning, is “whether law as a tool – that is a method of change involving force – is effective or respectful of nonwhite women and their concerns.”<sup>145</sup> We can ask this same question in relation to young people of color across gender lines. Is the law respectful of the concerns of Black youth and other young people of color? How does the state, dominant understandings of violence, and social structures work together to further violence against young people? Is law used as a symbolic remedy for violence in the lives of young people, with consequences that increase rather than ameliorate harm? What are

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<sup>145</sup> Isabelle Gunning, “Global Feminism at the Local Level: The Criminalization of Female Genital Surgeries,” in *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 339



approaches to challenging violence that center young people's voices and their concerns, but do not employ law as tools of redress or symbols of opposition? These questions, based in the theoretical frameworks of radical Black feminist and Critical Race Theory, contribute to the framing of this project.

*Transformation:* Transformation is the key. The overall project of critical race and Black feminist scholarship is “anti-subordinationist social transformation,” the elimination of oppression in all its forms and the development of a society that ensures human freedom.<sup>146</sup> A commitment to fundamental transformation is one of the most important tenets of Black feminist and Critical Race Theory. What does fundamental transformation mean? For Black feminists and critical race theorists, fundamental transformation entails the substitution of the capitalist political economy with a political economic system that entitles everyone to self-determination and the resources they need to live; the restructuring of social institutions so that they replicate justice, rather than oppression, and a radical change in human consciousness that enables every individual to see and uphold the inherent worth and dignity of every human being and community.

Frances Beal, a co-founder of the first national Black feminist organization in the U.S., articulated the necessity of each of these levels of transformation in our development of a new society.<sup>147</sup> She wrote:

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<sup>146</sup> Francisco Valdes, “Outsider Scholars, Critical Race Theory, and “OutCrit” Perspective: Postsubordinationist Vision as Jurisprudential Method, in *Crossroads, New Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 399 - 410.

<sup>147</sup> Frances Beal co-founded the Black Women's Liberation Caucus, a caucus within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. After about a year, members of the Black Women's Liberation Caucus decided to become an independent organization, the Black Women's Alliance. A short time later, the Black Women's Alliance incorporated a deeper anti-imperialist critique and connected with Puerto Rican women active in the Puerto Rican independence movement. The Black Women's

The Black community and Black women especially must begin raising questions about the kind of society we wish to see established. We must note the ways in which capitalism oppresses us and then move to create institutions that will eliminate these destructive influences. The new world that we are attempting to create must destroy oppression of any type .... Black women must take an active part in bringing about a society where our children, our loved ones, and each citizen can grow up and love ad decent human beings, free from the pressures of racism and capitalist exploitation.<sup>148</sup>

Contemporary Black feminist scholar bell hooks has urged that in our efforts to transform institutions, “it is crucial that we not ignore the self nor the longing people have to transform the self.” However, a triple focus on transforming systems, institutions and the self is often hard to maintain. Talking about self and community transformation within public conversations on oppression and violence has been especially difficult for members of oppressed communities because of the ideological conditions that often name us or specific members of our communities as always already oppressive, aggressive, and violent.

Black feminists such as Alice Walker and Ntozake Shange have dared to use their art as a tool to challenge the violence within and without Black communities and to provide Black women with a much-needed space for critical dialogue and healing. However, they have often endured biting and painful criticism for addressing issues of patriarchy, misogyny and sexual abuse within Black communities through creative works in the public domain. In a public landscape that demonizes our communities, “How do we talk to one another about the hard stuff?,” to quote Professor Charles

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Alliance then changed their name to the Third World Women’s Alliance and opened their membership to all Third World Women. See Kimberly Springer. *Living for the Revolution. Black Feminist Organizations, 1968 – 1980*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

<sup>148</sup> Frances Beal. “Double Jeopardy” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 154-155.

Lawrence.<sup>149</sup> I believe that one crucial step is acknowledging our urgent need for transformation at each of these levels and doing our best to keep the need for transformation at all levels on the table at all times.

Black feminist and critical race scholars' attention to multi-level transformation frames this project in three primary ways. First, I analyze how young people have sought to transform dominant understandings on youth and violence through their participation in cultural activism and community organizing. I specifically attend to the question of how youth talk about violence in a landscape littered with representations of Black youth as violent and Black families as pathological. Secondly, I consider the need for transformation of youths' understandings of violence. I especially ask if and to what extent youths' discourses and narratives of violence critique gendered and sexualized forms of violence against youth. Finally, I ask, how can the transformation of discourses, theories and narratives of youth and violence at both of these levels lead to personal and social transformation and the presence of increased safety and justice for youth?

*Praxis:* Transformation requires praxis. We know this for certain. The term, praxis refers to conscious action.<sup>150</sup> It can also be understood as the cyclical process of reflection and practice that enables conscious action, or theoretically driven practice. Praxis entails developing critical theory through engagement in action and using theory to guide our hands-on efforts for social change. Praxis erases the divide

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<sup>149</sup> Charles R. Lawrence III, "Foreword: Who Are We? Why Are We Here? Doing Critical Race Theory in Hard Times," in *Crossroads, Directions and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), xi – xxi.

<sup>150</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 323 – 377.

between theory and action, acknowledging that our work for social change requires critical thought and direct action. The notion of praxis emphasizes that those of us interested in the development of theory for social change must theorize through practice and engagement in grassroots political struggle. Robin Kelley beautifully explains this process in relation to progressive social movements:

Social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions. The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression. For example, the academic study of race has always been inextricably intertwined with political struggles. Just as imperialism, colonialism, and post-Reconstruction redemption politics created the intellectual ground for Social Darwinism and other manifestations of scientific racism, the struggle against racism generated cultural relativist and social constructionist scholarship on race. The great works by W.E.B. Du Bois, Franz Boas, Oliver Cox, and many others were invariably shaped by social movements as well as social crises such as the proliferation of lynching and the rise of fascism. Similarly, gender analysis was brought to us by the feminist movement, not simply the individual genius of the Grimke sisters or Anna Julia Cooper, Simone de Beauvoir, or Audre Lorde. Thinking on gender and the possibility of transformation evolved largely in relationship to social struggle.<sup>151</sup>

Participation in progressive social movements involves the collective community-based development of theory, as well as growth in the consciousness of all participants. Critical race and Black feminist scholars recognize activist organizations and community organizing groups as catalysts and incubators for critical theory directly informed by collective action. We are often members of these organizations and articulate the insights that we learn through them in our scholarship.

Transformative praxis both requires and leads to a critical consciousness and emancipatory vision. Likewise, our scholarship should also stem from and engender critical consciousness and emancipatory vision. But, we can only meet this goal when

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<sup>151</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

we are in dialogue with our communities and society. [B]ell hooks has written that, “feminist theory should necessarily be directed at masses of women and men in our society, educating us collectively for critical consciousness.”<sup>152</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw agrees, insisting that directing our work to a mass community “often means speaking in mass media. We need to determine how to translate our work better, to intervene in ways that help model interventions at the local level, to show people what a difference critical race thinking makes in their own workplaces and communities.”<sup>153</sup> hooks concurs, but cautions that our communication must be laden with visionary solutions: “Talking about the need for change without presenting substantive models and strategies for change frustrates...We may know that we need transformation, we may crave transformation but lack a sense that these desires can be addressed by a feminist politics or radical politics.”<sup>154</sup> Makani Themba Nixon, a community organizer and media strategist, has reminded us that people have an awareness and analysis of the social issues that impact their lives. Therefore, “it is not giving people information that’s key to motivating them to act, but validating their perceptions and conveying a sense that the change they dare to imagine in these private spaces is achievable and desired by a great many others.”<sup>155</sup> This project is in many ways a response to these lessons. Through this dissertation, I seek to challenge and facilitate, as well as validate and envision.

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<sup>152</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 1989), p.35

<sup>153</sup> Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “The First Decade: Critical Reflections, Or ‘A Foot in the Closing Door,’” in *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 25

<sup>154</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 1989), 33

<sup>155</sup> Makani N. Themba, *Making Policy Making Change: How Communities Are Taking Law into Their Own Hands* (Berkeley: Chardon Press, 1999), 3.

Critical race scholar Francisco Valdes has theorized vision as a method. He suggests that we “begin a project by first envisioning as concretely as possible where one wants to be at its end, then working back from that vision to plan the journey. And sometimes it is useful to imagine and spell out for oneself (and others) not only what the project is “against” but also what it is “for.”<sup>156</sup> I wrote “Yes!” up and down the margins of the page next to his words when I first read his article, “Outsider Scholars, Critical Race Theory, and ‘Outcrit’ Perspective: Postsubordinationist Vision as Jurisprudential Method.”<sup>157</sup> Vision, according to Valdes, is not only a method to “activate political analysis” but can also be used as “another way of approaching and assessing [the] efficacy and design” of your research.<sup>158</sup> “Yes, this is it!” Valdes’ vision-based method captures one of the most important elements of this project as well as one of the most important ways that my involvement in community organizing has informed my approach to research.

Oppression, transformation, and praxis are key words that summarize the core beliefs of Black feminist and Critical Race Theory. Black feminist and critical race scholars believe that multiple systems of oppression are built into society, culture and the state. These systems of oppression are intersectional, multi-dimensional, and mutually reinforcing. The state, social structures and dominant ideologies work

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<sup>156</sup> Francisco Valdes, “Outsider Scholars, Critical Race Theory, and “OutCrit” Perspective: Postsubordinationist Vision as Jurisprudential Method, in *Crossroads, New Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 403

<sup>157</sup> Francisco Valdes, “Outsider Scholars, Critical Race Theory, and “OutCrit” Perspective: Postsubordinationist Vision as Jurisprudential Method, in *Crossroads, New Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 399-410

<sup>158</sup> Francisco Valdes, “Outsider Scholars, Critical Race Theory, and “OutCrit” Perspective: Postsubordinationist Vision as Jurisprudential Method, in *Crossroads, New Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, ed. Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 403

together to maintain oppression. The dismantling of oppression requires fundamental transformation. We must transform society, the capitalist political economy, institutions, and ourselves.

Transformation requires praxis, theorizing through practice and theory-driven action. Praxis entails our participation in grassroots political struggles, the formation of critical consciousness, and the development of emancipatory vision. These goals are not only individual, but collective, requiring that scholars work as part of and in dialogue with people within and outside of our communities. Although these ideas are theorized and documented in Black feminist and critical race scholarship, I first learned them through my own participation in grassroots organizing. I have been involved in various kinds of political activism since high school, but it was not until I returned to Maryland after college that I became involved in community organizing, a process of sustained collective action to build grassroots power, develop new leadership, and bring about tangible long-term changes to institutions and local communities.

### *Participation in Cultural Activism and Community Organizing*

After graduating from the University of Missouri-Columbia in May 2002, I came back to Maryland to be closer to my family again and start a new chapter in my life. I had decided to attend graduate school directly after college in pursuit of a doctoral degree. In the fall of 2002, I began a doctoral program in American Studies at the University of Maryland – College Park. Inspired by my experiences abroad, I identified my primary research interest as Black transnationalism, exploring the

meaning of Blackness as Black people moved among nations. I did well in all of my graduate school courses, but felt isolated from community.

Being active in community organizations had always helped me to establish connection. Thus, toward the end of my first year of graduate school, I decided to look for an organization to join. During the Chesapeake American Studies Association Conference held on my campus in April, Emory University graduate students presented on a conference they organized to connect campus and community. I saw the Blackout Arts Collective mentioned in materials they passed around. At the end of their session, I walked back to the graduate student office in my department and “googled” the Blackout Arts Collective. I was amazed and impressed by what I found. Blackout Artists Collective members defined themselves as artists, activists, and educators working to empower communities of color through the arts. Each summer, they held the Lyrics on Lockdown Tour, a series of workshops and performances in various cities designed to raise awareness and opposition to the prison industrial complex. Here, I said, is an organization for me.

After I sent a message to the Blackout web site indicating my interest in getting involved, Piper Anderson, the program director, connected me to Blackout Arts Collective members in D.C. who had recently relocated from New York City, where the organization was born. That spring, the two veteran members and I, along with a few of their friends, began working to start a D.C. area chapter of the Blackout Arts Collective. As the summer was approaching, our first main objective was to organize local stops for the Lyrics on Lockdown Tour. I volunteered to organize a workshop and performance at D.C.’s juvenile detention center, although I had no



relationship to the facility and knew little about juvenile justice issues. I acquired connections and knowledge in the process. During subsequent summers, I would organize an arts activism camp on the prison industrial complex for high school students and serve as the videographer and evaluator of the Southeast leg of the Lyrics on Lockdown Tour, traveling to Atlanta, New Orleans and Houston one month before Hurricane Katrina. My participation in Blackout strengthened my knowledge and skills in cultural activism, connected me with like-minded cultural workers around the country, and inspired my research on the prison-industrial complex. However, it was our growing connection with another organization that especially enabled and inspired my future work.

Shortly after I became involved in Blackout, I learned about the Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition and began attending meetings. A membership-based coalition of youth, adults and organizations, the Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition (JDCY) used advocacy and organizing to decrease youth incarceration and increase positive opportunities for youth development. At monthly Coalition meetings, I met public defenders, youth workers, high school students, college students, parents, and professors. I used the connections I established through JDCY to organize a Blackout workshop at Oak Hill Youth Center, D.C.'s juvenile prison. My experience at Oak Hill that summer and at JDCY's monthly meetings motivated me to become an active and ongoing member of the Coalition. I learned about a lawsuit and federal consent decree against the District because of Oak Hill's abhorrent and became an active participant in the Coalition's "No More Oak Hills!" campaign. During my first year of membership in JDCY, I worked alongside youth and adults to lead and develop

workshops, testify at City Council hearings, speak at press conferences, and inform people about pending juvenile justice policies that would send more young people to prison. I was developing as a local leader and transitioned to the chair of the outreach committee. A short time later, I was nominated to join the steering committee, the governance body responsible for overseeing JDCY's development and direction.

When I returned to the University of Maryland – College Park in the fall of 2003, I changed my research focus from Black transnationalism to U.S. incarceration. It was not only my new organizational experiences that motivated me, but also a conversation with a close friend who was teaching high school in Baltimore City. After I explained my research focus on Black transnational identity, she turned to me and asked, “What will do that do for the kids in my classroom?” I gave her an answer to connect the dots and she understood what I was describing as we had met when we were both studying abroad in Ghana. But, my answer was not concrete enough for me. I wanted to do research that could tangibly affect the young people in Francesca's classes.

I began studying academic scholarship and policy reports critical of the United States' imprisonment binge. The research defined the prison industrial complex, theorized the root causes of mass incarceration, and explained why specific groups such as African-American men, African-American women, and young people of color are locked up so frequently and so long. Report after article after monograph spelled out the ominous situation:

Over 2 million people are incarcerated in the United States, most for non-violent drug-related offenses. African-American men make up approximately 50% of the prison population. Black women are the fastest rising demographic group behind bars. Young people of color are incarcerated in increasingly

astounding rates. Racism, business interests, and criminalization, are among the reasons why.

I learned about various genealogies of punishment such as the relationship between the modern prison industrial complex and historical processes of slavery and convict leasing. I also learned about intersections between incarceration and globalization, neoliberalism, social control, political repression, state violence, media, culture, and law. There was so much depth within this body of research, but there were also some critical absences. I had hope that things would change – and in fact, I knew they were changing through my involvement in local organizing. However, the research that I read was not so optimistic, devoid of both hope and vision.<sup>159</sup> I also noticed that the voices of young people involved in movements to change the system were missing from this scholarship. I decided to focus my research on youth activism against incarceration and criminalization to fill this critical gap. I also believed that this research could make a concrete difference for the students in Francesca’s classes.

How my research expanded to include a concerted focus on violence has a great deal to do with my involvement in Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. Incite! is a national organization of radical women of color committed to ending violence against women of color and our communities through direct action, critical dialogue, and grassroots organizing. The organization started in 2000 after a small group of women organized, “The Color of Violence,” a national conference to build analysis and strategies for ending violence against women of color. Within

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<sup>159</sup> Joy James has similarly commented on the absence of hope and vision in a great deal of academic scholarship, stating, “People who resist impoverishment and violence at times seem discouraged by elite academic discourse, the low threshold of political courage it inspires, as well as its truncated visions of radical change.” Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3.

movements for racial justice, women of color have long been ignored as survivors of police brutality and other state-sponsored violence. Similarly, white feminist movements have routinely disregarded women of color in their work against sexual assault and domestic violence. Incite!'s organizing confronts violence against women whether committed by custodians of the state or members of our communities. Incite! expanded the contemporary discourse of violence against women to include institutional harms such as imprisonment, militarism, and medical experimentation. Their approach illuminates the connections between state violence and community violence, as well as the links between the victimization of women of color and the victimization of our communities.

I became involved in Incite! Women of Color Against Violence in 2004. The organization provided me with a framework to connect my experiences of interpersonal violence with my involvement in anti-prison organizing. For example, our local Incite! chapter launched a campaign against sexual harassment of women of color on the street and other public spaces. The purpose of the campaign was to decrease sexual harassment on the street, which often escalated to violence, and to increase options for addressing violence outside of the criminal legal system. Our anti-street harassment campaign led to increased dialogue about patriarchal violence within our communities and facilitated the creation of strategies that men and women can use to intervene in harassment – interventions that could also prove effective in other situations and serve as alternatives to calling the police.

During the summer of 2005 when Incite!'s anti-street harassment campaign was at its peak, youth in Justice 4 D.C. Youth's summer organizing institute began to

plan a campaign to address police harassment against youth. Youth organizers participating in JDCY's organizing institute from Facilitating Leadership in Youth, a youth organization located in Anacostia, had already begun work on a pamphlet about police harassment of young people in Southeast D.C. During the fall 2006 semester, I began writing a research paper to help me think through the connections and intersections of these efforts more deeply. The paper that I produced, "Envisioning Safety in an Era of Criminalization: Women, Youth, Violence and Resistance," was the first time that I articulated many of the concerns and questions that I address in this dissertation.

In a section called, "Linguistic Limitations and Discursive Dilemmas: The Language of Race, Gender and Generation," I wrote about the differences in how "youth" and "women" were framed in relation to violence:

It is striking that the relationship between young people and violence is typically written as "youth violence," while the relationship between women and violence is usually inscribed as "violence against women." These two very different discursive formations tell us that it is youth who commit violence and women who are violated. Of course, these semantics operate differently based on the race and gender of the subjects in focus i.e. "youth violence" prompts us to think about brown and black male bodies, while "violence against women," often propels us to imagine women who are adults as well as white.

The discourses about youth, women and violence I just described are reflected in mainstream and academic texts about violence, as well as images in popular culture and the news media. It is as unusual to read or hear the phrase, "violence against youth" as it is to read the phrase "women violence." While these constructions also do not allow for intersectional analysis along the lines of gender and generation, inverting the ways in which these phrases construct the relationships between women and youth to violence helps us to deconstruct the dominant discourses predicated on the familiar phrases, "youth violence" and "violence against women." Interestingly, there are no common terms that directly name men or adults in relation to violence, at least not any as widely circulated as those involving women and youth. But, it is adult, white men who commit

more violence than any other demographic group, and young people of color who experience the most violence.<sup>160</sup>

As I became increasingly familiar with the scholarship of Incite! members engaged in re-visioning analysis and discourses of violence against women of color, I began to look for research on how young people were involved in articulating their own analysis and perspectives of violence in relation to their identity as youth. Incite's framework on violence against women of color, which was indebted to an earlier generation of Black radical feminists, led me to question the dominant discourses and frameworks used to understand and talk about youth and violence. These questions and a focus on youth agency influenced by my awareness of youth organizing directly led to this research project.

But something else happened in the summer of 2006 that also led to my decision to embark on this project. Just two years after Justice 4 D.C. Youth! defeated a package of punitive policy proposals introduced as a response "youth violence," a similar package of legislation was on the table again. On July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the D.C. City Council passed a 90-day emergency crime legislation introduced by the Mayor and Police Chief that opened police access to previously confidential juvenile court records, instituted a 10 p.m. curfew for teenagers, and required judges to detain more youth prior to trial. The law also increased police presence in areas with high rates of reported crime and instituted surveillance cameras in certain neighborhoods. The policy, as well as a torrent of media coverage, addressed the popular, but inaccurate idea that teenagers were leading a violent crime wave. An unusually high number of armed robberies and murders had occurred during the first two weeks of July 2006.

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<sup>160</sup> Johonna McCants, "Envisioning Safety in an Era of Criminalization: Women, Youth, Violence, and Resistance." Unpublished paper, January 2006, 1 - 24.

The most publicized incident was the murder of a young British politician in Georgetown on July 9, 2006. Three adults, ages 25, 22, and 26, and a teenager, age 15, were charged with the killing. Although two of the three people involved were age 25 or over, the incident was publicized and portrayed as an incident of rampant “youth violence” and toughening laws that affect juveniles became the focus of public policy efforts.

On July 13, 2006, four days before D.C.’s crime bill was passed into law, *USA Today* published a front page story headlined, “Police Time Jump in Crime to Juveniles.” The story included a number of erroneous statistics to support the contention that teenagers were driving a rise in crime not only in Washington, D.C., but also around the country. Justice 4 D.C. Youth! responded to the legislation and media coverage with a campaign for policies that invest in young people and were proven to prevent juvenile crime, such as strengthening the city’s youth employment program. Advocates from the nation’s leading juvenile justice and children’s policy organizations also came together to develop a strategy for addressing the new panic on “youth violence.” I attended and spoke at a briefing called, “Juvenile Crime Data” D.C. and the National Context,” convened by the National Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Coalition.

My comments focused on Justice 4 D.C. Youth’s successful “Stop the War on D.C. Youth” campaign, which I discuss in chapter four of this dissertation. Nearly everyone in the room attested that their greatest challenge lie in how to counter calls for punitive policies while addressing the concerns and fears of communities most impacted by violence. A few months later, I submitted a proposal to a national

foundation for a grant to fund a project in which I would work with young people to create and promote community-based solutions to violence. I received the grant in March 2007 and launched the Visions to Peace Project soon after. The work that I do with young people through Visions to Peace continues to inform the questions and analysis that I present in this work.

### *Conclusion*

Beginning in the 1960s, radical Black feminists produced new ways of understanding and challenging violence against women of color and our communities.<sup>161</sup> Since the late 1980s, Critical Race Theory has been used in conjunction with this tradition of Black feminism to uncover and address narrow understandings of violence and further the practice of safety and freedom. This line of scholarship is especially indebted to the work of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a co-founder of Critical Race Theory and a noted author of Black feminist legal theory. Crenshaw's practice of critical race and Black feminist theory has informed the way in which I have discussed them in this chapter – discussing their convergences and intersections more than their differences. Crenshaw uses Critical Race Theory as a methodological platform, while employing Black feminist theory as the perspective through which she interprets. I take a similar approach.

In Crenshaw's groundbreaking article published in 1989, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,"

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<sup>161</sup> Participants included grassroots organizers such as Angela Davis and Frances Beal, political organizations such as the Combahee River Collective, and artists and cultural workers like Ntozake Shange and Alice Walker. These and other Third World feminists used grassroots organizing to re-define the meaning of violence, highlight the many forms that violence takes, and advance community-based strategies of resistance.



she applied her theoretical concept of intersectionality to the topic of domestic violence and sexual assault against women of color.<sup>162</sup> Crenshaw argued that feminist and antiracist discourses concealed gender violence against women of color. Providing numerous examples based on her site visits to domestic violence shelters and rape crisis centers, Crenshaw shows how anti-violence advocates' failure to understand the varied experiences of women of color has left women of color increasingly vulnerable to violence and underserved by mainstream resources. She also addresses this failure in relation to U.S. law, explaining how policies such as the Violence Against Women Act were created with white middle-class women in mind and overlook the concerns of women of color. Intersectionality is provided as an analytical tool to reveal and address these short-comings while stories of women's experiences are used to expose their impacts. According to Crenshaw,

Intersectionality may provide the means for dealing with other marginalizations as well. For example, race can also be a coalition of straight and gay people of color, and thus serve as a basis for critique of churches and other cultural institutions that reproduce heterosexism. ... Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics.<sup>163</sup>

Following Crenshaw's example, I will not only incorporate intersectionality as a tool for coalition-building, but also go beyond critique and analysis to suggest applications for grassroots struggle.

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<sup>162</sup> Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991), 1241 - 99. Note: Crenshaw introduced the term, intersectionality, in her article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Law Forum* (1989), 139-167.

<sup>163</sup> Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991), 1297.

Building on the tradition institutionalized by Crenshaw, I use Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory to uncover multiple dimensions of violence against youth by centering the discourses and practices of Black youth engaged in resistance. My next chapter, which focuses on hip hop music, is inspired by the role that the arts played in the development of my own critical consciousness, as well as my experience of the literary and performing arts as sites of cultural activism. I show how young people in Black communities created a tradition of concealed storytelling that challenges mainstream stock stories about youth and violence. In chapter four, I discuss a community organizing campaign that I participated in as a member of the Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition. As part of the intergenerational and multi-racial campaign, Black and Latino youth challenged the mainstream perspectives on youth and violence used to rationalize punitive policies against youth of color in Washington, D.C. I present this history as a story of resistance.<sup>164</sup> In my final chapter, I move from mining the stories and discourses of youth to a careful interrogation of youths' ideas and practices. Through attention to multi-level transformation and praxis, central facets of both Black feminist and Critical Race Theory, I address the blind spots and blunders within the stories, discourses, and ideologies of young cultural workers and organizers. I also consider how we can employ and build on the concealed stories told through hip hop as well as organizing-centric stories of resistance to advance new counter-stories on youth and violence. This framework also shapes my methodological choices.

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<sup>164</sup> Like Gunning's work on female genital mutilation, their campaign also illuminates how a failure to ask youth for their input on policies that impact their lives will often lead to policies that increase violence against them, rather than help to curtail it.

In this dissertation, I examine cultural production, theory construction, policies, ideologies, discourses, political economic systems, and organizing campaigns. I use the Critical Race Theory framework of stock stories, concealed stories, resistance stories, and counter-stories to frame the narrative of this dissertation as a whole. My approach also reflects the practice of deep contextualization, another key contribution of Critical Race Theory, in that I also describe and emphasize the surrounding climates of criminalization in which youth have created and advanced critical narratives and discourses of violence. This approach contributes to the fields of American studies, youth studies, and public policy and the areas of cultural activism and community organizing. I also seek to inform the work of policy makers, academic scholars, grassroots organizers and cultural workers invested in dismantling the prison industrial complex and creating healthy, sustainable communities. Lastly, I understand this dissertation as a part of the cycle of praxis - a theoretically driven reflection on past and current practice developed to inform future practice -- the practices of scholars, cultural workers, community organizers, educators, and policy makers in addition to the many people like myself who work at these intersections.

## Chapter 3: Learning Critical Perspectives on Youth and Violence from Young Hip Hop Artists

### *Introduction*

The minute they see me, fear me  
I'm the epitome - a public enemy  
Used, abused without clues  
I refused to blow a fuse  
They even had it on the news  
Don't believe the hype...  
- Public Enemy<sup>165</sup>

“I will suggest that our ways of seeing the world, the knowledge we think we have of it, are as prone to do violence to the other as any other dimension of our common existence; in short, that there is an epistemic violence at work, feeding on preconceived notions of our “self,” that reduce the image of the other on the basis of their difference, in this case, of pigmentation and culture, with practical implications.  
- James R. Cochrane<sup>166</sup>

In “Don’t Believe the Hype,” Public Enemy raps against criminalization.

When we consider the words of James Cochrane, a South African theologian, it is easy to recognize that Public Enemy is also talking about epistemic violence, the harms and injuries that can result from the production and promotion of knowledge. Dominant sources of knowledge have promoted accounts of youth and violence that contribute to the criminalization and incarceration of Black youth, as well as other kinds of harm and injury. Young people in Black communities have also promoted their own accounts that advance alternative perspectives and understandings of violence. This relationship is especially apparent in the 1980s and early 1990s, a period characterized by increasing portrayals of Black youth as violent criminals, unprecedented prison expansion and the growth of hip hop as a cultural movement

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<sup>165</sup> Public Enemy, “Don’t Believe the Hype,” *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Def Jam Recordings, 1988.

<sup>166</sup> James R. Cochrane, “The Epistemic Violence of Racism: Hidden Transcripts of Whiteness,” *Chora-Strangers*. at: <http://www.chora-strangers.org/article/cochrane2002b>

among urban Black working-class youth. In this chapter, I contend that young hip hop artists advanced critical understandings of violence by telling stories that expose the violence of political economic policies, emphasize compassion for demonized and criminalized subjects, and reveal the need for healing alongside political resistance. Their stories also name multiple forms and sources of violence against youth.

My methodology merges cultural criticism with discourse analysis, while also integrating discussions of political economy and history.<sup>167</sup> I analyze lyrics from well-known hip hop songs in the 1980s and 90s, providing an example of three different theoretical and discursive strategies that young hip hop artists have used to communicate about violence. My primary analysis centers on three songs: “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (1982), “I Cram to Understand U (Sam)” by M.C. Lyte (1987), and “Me Against the World” by Tupac (1995).<sup>168</sup> I frame the analysis of each song with a discussion of dominant discourses of youth and violence circulating during the time period in which the song was released. The contextualization that I provide shows how popular discourses, public policies, and academic research on youth and violence have contributed to the criminalization of young people of color, particularly Black youth in urban, working-class communities.

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<sup>167</sup> Although I only name Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory as germane to my methodology, I employ a range of theoretical approaches in my analysis. This method of investigation is informed by Clyde Woods’ *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*. In *Development Arrested*, Woods analyzes the blues as an aesthetic form and a source of theory about social and economic development. His analysis integrates “several approaches to political economy, cultural criticism, institutional analysis, regional transformation, and periodization.” Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso Books, 1998), 212.

<sup>168</sup> Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message,” *The Message*, Dbk Works, 1982; M.C. Lyte and D.J. K-Rock, “I Cram To Understand U (Sam),” *I Cram To Understand U (Sam)*, First Priority Music, 1987; Tupac, *Me Against the World*, *Me Against the World*, 1995. I also talk about or reference the content of additional songs such as Killers by Ice T (1981), Stop the Violence by KRS-One (1988), and Brenda’s Got a Baby by Tupac (1991).

My discussion of context also underscores the theoretical and discursive interventions that young people have made in these climates.

My analysis in this chapter is informed by Black feminist theory as well as Critical Race Theory. In *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, Hazel Carby argues for the necessity of situating the narratives of marginalized groups within the dominant discourses that impact their development. According to Carby, this approach allows us to assess the cultural efficacy of marginalized ideologies and theories, as well as how the creators of marginalized narratives have “addressed, used, transformed, and on occasion, subverted the dominant ideological codes.”<sup>169</sup> Black feminist writers have also given us a sharp understanding of epistemological privilege, the notion that the real experts are those who know through firsthand experience. In addition, Black feminist cultural critics such as Barbara Christian have emphasized arts and culture as sources of marginalized social theory.<sup>170</sup> Other Black feminist cultural critics such as Jacqueline Bobo have also stressed the need for scholars to accentuate the political agency and intellectualism of marginalized groups, even within the context of oppressive structures and confining ideologies.<sup>171</sup> In this chapter, I recognize the epistemological privilege of Black working-class youth in urban communities and hip-hop music as a rich source of theoretical insight, while calling attention to how young people have expressed their political agency and intellect within hip hop music.

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<sup>169</sup> Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 20-21. Carby situates Black women’s novels and the stories they tell within the context of dominant discourses and ideologies of white female sexuality.

<sup>170</sup> Barbara Christian, “A Race for Theory,” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

<sup>171</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, “Preface: Bearing Witness,” in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

I also draw from Critical Race Theory to analyze hip hop music as a rich source of radical theorizing and subjugated knowledge. Critical race theorists have contributed the theoretical constructs of stock stories and counter stories. A stock story is a narrative that reflects hegemonic knowledge, justifies the status quo, and is accepted throughout mainstream society.<sup>172</sup> Counter-stories are stories that are deliberately created to subvert, challenge, and debunk stock stories. A team of teacher educators at Barnard College have expanded this conceptual framework to include concealed stories and stories of resistance.<sup>173</sup> In concealed stories, marginalized and stigmatized people recount their experiences, affirm their identity and survival in the face of oppression, or “critique or ‘talk back’ to the mainstream narratives.”<sup>174</sup> When concealed stories are deliberately constructed to challenge the dominant understandings presented in stock stories, they also serve as counter-stories.<sup>175</sup> This chapter focuses on the concealed stories that young people have told about violence through the medium of hip hop music. Many of these songs are also counter-stories in that they deliberately counter dominant stories of youth and violence. Public Enemy’s

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<sup>172</sup> Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 35.

<sup>173</sup> Their storytelling framework outlines four kinds of stories: stock stories, concealed stories, resistance stories, and counter-stories. I will refer to stock stories, concealed stories, and counter-stories within this chapter. Resistance stories will be discussed in chapter four.

<sup>174</sup> Lee Anne Bell et al, “The Storytelling Project Curriculum: Learning about Race and Racism through Storytelling and the Arts,” (New York: Barnard College, 2008), 8 – 9. The notion of “concealed stories” reminds us that the stories of marginalized and stigmatized groups exist alongside “stock stories” that reflect mainstream understandings and popular knowledge. The notion of concealed stories also acknowledges that the storytelling practices of marginalized and stigmatized groups are not always deliberately constructed to challenge dominant narratives. Many storytellers are more concerned with articulating and advancing their own discourses, analysis and frameworks among members of their communities. Concealed stories can also be understood as a kind of public “hidden transcript,” – particularly when they are communicated through cultural forms such as hip hop music that are prominently shared in the public arena but whose meanings and messages are not clearly understood by social elites, dominant groups, or people outside of a form’s targeted audience. Here, I am referencing James C. Scott’s notions of “public transcripts” and “hidden transcripts.” James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

“Don’t Believe the Hype,” the song quoted in the epigraph, is an example of such a counter-story.

Finally, my focus in this chapter reflects my belief that academic scholars, community organizers, policy makers and others can learn a great deal about how to communicate and challenge violence against youth by learning from the analysis that young people have articulated through hip hop. Cultural studies scholar Michael Hames Garcia has argued that “social theory is flawed at its core to the degree that it is unable to ground itself in the lives of those whom it is supposed to affect.”

The result of such a repositioning of critical social theory on a large scale would be a significant transformation of the leftist political and theoretical landscape. Among other things, this kind of “praxical” view of theory (that is, of theory as arrived at through experiencing and acting in the world) could force theorists to acknowledge that some contradictions cannot be resolved neatly in the abstract, but rather should be worked out in concrete situations, “on the ground,” as social scientists say.<sup>176</sup>

It is imperative to illuminate the theoretical contributions of young hip hop artists, even while recognizing that there are contradictions and silences, which will require further analysis and reflection grounded in personal experience and social action. As I will discuss in the conclusion to this chapter, one subject of contradiction and silence that many other cultural critics have discussed is cultural and physical violence against young women and sexual minorities. It is also necessary to recognize that hip hop, like all forms of popular music, is dialogic.<sup>177</sup> Artists and audiences reinterpret,

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<sup>176</sup> Michael Hames Garcia, *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race and the Meaning of Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xlv.

<sup>177</sup> George Lipsitz has contended that, “Popular music is nothing if not dialogic, the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or last word. The traces of the past that pervade the popular music of the present amount to more than mere chance: they are not simply juxtapositions of incompatible realities. They reflect a dialogic process, one embedded in collective history and nurtured by the ingenuity of artists interested in fashioning icons of opposition. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 99, as quoted in Tricia Rose, “Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile,” in



revise, and respond to messages, meanings, and ambiguities within the music and society at large, while engaging in dialogue with dominant cultural scripts, other hip hop songs, other musical genres, and additional sources of cultural discourse. This understanding informs my approach to hip hop criticism.

### *My Approach to Hip Hop Criticism*

Although hip hop was born during the 1970s, it began to walk during the 1980s – traveling from the streets of urban Black communities to the ears of mainstream America. From its earliest days, hip hop music was used to develop and promote the cultural and political consciousness of young people in urban working-class neighborhoods. While hip hop music and culture has attracted and involved a wide range of people, my analysis of hip hop is rooted in an understanding of its cultural location. As cultural critic and legal scholar Imani Perry has shown, “hip hop is an iteration of Black language, Black music, Black style, and Black youth culture.”<sup>178</sup> While Perry cites the primarily African-American communities, voices, styles, and perspectives that characterize hip hop music, Mark Anthony Neal has emphasized hip hop’s generational identity. According to Neal, “Hip-hop differed from previous structures influenced by African-American youth in that it was largely

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*Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo (Malden, Mass. Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 236

<sup>178</sup> Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2. Perry seems to use the terms Black and African-American interchangeably. However, I use the term Black to refer to people of African descent more broadly. My usage of Black youth therefore includes Jamaican and Puerto Rican youth of African descent who also played leading roles in the creation and proliferation of hip hop. Many of these youth were second-generation immigrants, and may have also considered themselves African-American and/or identified as members of multiple ethnic groups.

predicated and driven by Black youth culture itself.”<sup>179</sup> It is also important to keep in mind the gendered, geographic, and classed dimensions of hip hop music including the predominance of young men, the prevalence of artists from post-industrial cities along the East and West Coasts, and the authority of working-class rather than middle and upper class experience.

Cultural critics such as Tricia Rose, Robin Kelley, and Imani Perry have produced invaluable studies of hip hop that have contributed to our understanding of the aesthetic, political, cultural and social dimensions of hip hop music.<sup>180</sup> As I excavate the critical theories of violence that young people have embedded in hip hop, I both build on and depart from existing cultural criticism in this area. In *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class*, Robin Kelley analyzes gangsta rap in Los Angeles, delineating four characteristics of hip hop artists’ treatment of violence.<sup>181</sup> Focusing on L.A.-based rappers specifically, Kelley argues that hip hop artists trace the roots of gang violence and crime to the material conditions of their communities, name capitalism and mainstream American culture as “gangsterism,” decry police homicide as a genocidal war against young Black men, and reluctantly critique violence committed by members of urban communities.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Mark Anthony Neal. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 136. Although every genre of music can be understood as a generational intervention, Neal’s point emphasizes that hip hop music was wholly centered in Black youth culture unlike earlier genres of Black music that originated from slightly older or mixed generations.

<sup>180</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Robin D. G. Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics: ‘Gangsta Rap’ in Postindustrial Los Angeles,” in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 183 – 288; Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>181</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics: ‘Gangsta Rap’ in Postindustrial Los Angeles,” in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 183 – 288.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.* The interpretation of capitalism and American culture as gangsterism includes the idea that the real gangsters are “the people and institutions that control their lives – especially politicians, the state,

Tricia Rose, Todd Boyd, and Mark Anthony Neal have made similar arguments, providing us with the understanding that the criminalization, surveillance and incarceration of Black youth is a part of the violence that young people address within hip hop music.<sup>183</sup> Yet, there are other facets of artists' treatment of violence that have not yet been discussed within hip hop criticism. In recognizing Black youth as critical theorists, I seek to illuminate the critical understandings of violence within hip hop music that have not yet been adequately addressed or analyzed by academic scholars.

My analysis of hip hop music employs disidentification, a strategy of negotiating contradictory or conflicted discourses in order to recycle them for political and pedagogical uses. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz theorized the concept of disidentification to explain how queer artists of color incorporated normative or phobic cultural forms and practices within their art.<sup>184</sup> According to Muñoz, disidentification is a survival strategy by which minoritized subjects negotiate powerful cultural forms that are wholly or partly hostile or dismissive of their identities. Disidentification is also a tactic for cultural criticism that allows critics to recoup the liberatory components of cultural representations that may include oppressive elements such as homophobic or femiphobic language.<sup>185</sup> Muñoz

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and police departments” (Kelley 1996, 201). Kelley explains gangsta rappers' reluctant critique of “inner-city crime and violence” as resulting from the view of violence as necessary for survival and an important kind of rebellion as well as the construction of masculinity as violent and aggressive.

<sup>183</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You? Popular Culture from the Hood and Beyond* (South Bend: Indiana University Press, 1997); Mark Anthony Neal. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>184</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>185</sup> Michael Eric Dyson coined the term femiphobia, which refers to the fear and disdain of females. Femiphobia is reflected throughout hip hop music. As Dyson has explained, “Femiphobia has become a crucial part of the signification in rap that influences the lyrics of hip-hop artists, measures authentic rap – and hence, male – identity, specifies a pervasive machismo, and forges masculine bonds within the culture.” Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (New York:

credits radical feminists of color for originating and exemplifying the political strategy of disidentification, while also acknowledging its theoretical foundations in critical race theory, film studies, and gay and lesbian studies. Although Muñoz demonstrates disidentified engagement with dominant regimes of knowledge, I apply the tactic of disidentification to the subjugated knowledges of hip hop.

Disidentification describes the process by which I as a Black feminist can recognize Ice T as one of the most cogent theorists of violence, while also recognizing his participation in violence including the sexual exploitation of women.<sup>186</sup> Using disidentification, I can celebrate the late Tupac Shakur for his emotional honesty and sensitive portrayals of intimate violence, while also decrying his participation in the rape of a young woman.<sup>187</sup> Employing disidentification, it is easy to see that young cultural workers with conflicts and contradictions have used hip hop music to produce complex critique. Applying disidentification, I also contend that a cultural form regularly lambasted for its approving representations of violence is one of the most useful cultural forms that we have available for engaging young people in anti-violence praxis.<sup>188</sup> It may sound like disidentification is simply a process of selecting the positive elements within a given discourse and discarding that which is unsavory or unappealing. However, this is not the case. It is more like refusing to throw out the baby with the bath water.

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Basic Civitas Books, 2001), 15 as quoted in Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 128 – 129.

<sup>186</sup> Ice T worked as a pimp (among other underground jobs) before he became a popular rapper and has produced a number of pimp-themed films throughout the years such as the mockumentary *Pimps Up, Ho's Down* (1999) and *Ice T's Pimpin' 101* (2002), a pornographic video.

<sup>187</sup> The central difference between the stories by Tupac and the young woman survivor is whether Tupac actively or passively participated in her rape, not whether it took place at all. See footnote 110 for a longer discussion.

<sup>188</sup> I talk more about this point in the conclusion to this chapter, as well as in chapter five, the conclusion to this dissertation.

Disidentification is best understood as a transformative and revisionary approach to interpreting, negotiating, and employing discourses that are neither wholly hegemonic nor completely liberatory.<sup>189</sup> Michel Foucault's explanation of discourse contributes further insight:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.<sup>190</sup>

According to Munoz, "the Foucauldian theory of the polyvalence of discourse informs the theory of disidentification...,[which] understands that counterdiscourses, like discourse, can always fluctuate for different ideological ends."<sup>191</sup> This elaboration on discourse and disidentification is especially suitable for an analysis of hip hop, a discursive space characterized by its ideological diversity.

Imani Perry's theorization of the reunion in hip hop provides a clear understanding of hip hop as a space for free discourse. Perry argues that hip hop debunks the division between the sacred and profane, often applied to older Black cultural forms such as gospel music and the blues:

Hip hop critiques the division of that characterized as clean and that characterized as dirty or evil as both social and artistic praxis. Hip hop calls for a radical honesty concerning the complexity of Black communities and art, even in the public eye. While news media attempt to reinstitute the divide, trying to sift through the sea of MCs and searching for "good Negroes," they

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<sup>189</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>190</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1980), pp. 100 – 101, as quoted in José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 19.

<sup>191</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 19.

face a difficult and inorganic task. . . . The ideological democracy inherent in hip hop prevents the kind of coherent political framework necessary for it to be characterized as [“liberation music”]. That is not to say that the music lacks conscience or is amoral. Rather, there is abundant space for moral expression as well as critique.<sup>192</sup>

Perry characterizes hip hop as a space that “suppresses the silencing . . . of certain politics, ideologies, sexual preferences, or some other matters of personal choice possibly verging on the taboo.” While I believe that hip hop music also contributes to the silencing “of certain politics, ideologies, sexual preferences, [and] some other matters,” I agree with Perry that hip hop facilitates more open and honest expression than many other cultural spaces within and outside of Black communities. I also agree that as more of the art form came under the manipulation and control of the corporate recording industry, the space for free discourse became much smaller.<sup>193</sup> While serving as a space for discourse, hip hop music is also a vehicle of propaganda, pleasure and profit. Because it is simultaneously a medium to teach politics, make heads nod, and generate economic wealth, hip hop music cannot be interpreted as a purely ideological nor apolitical art form. Its messages and meanings should also be read in relation to the dominant cultural and political landscape on which it emerges. In the next section, I describe this context in relation to hip hop music developed by young hip hop artists in the 1980s and early 1990s. I assert that youths’ critical understandings of violence deployed through hip hop took shape within a national climate of criminalization.

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<sup>192</sup> Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 6.

<sup>193</sup> Perry also maintains that an open space for free discourse continues in underground hip hop music and among popular recording artists who remain connected and accountable to urban, Black working-class communities. I agree. Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 8.

## *The Violence of Criminalization*

In the late 1970s, Black youth developed a culture that allowed them to create their own representations and tell their own stories.<sup>194</sup> This culture is known as hip hop, and includes hip hop music. In the 1980s, hip hop music's place as the metaphorical microphone for Black youth took on added significance as mainstream journalism proliferated images of young Black men as violent, young Black women as lazy and Black working-class families as pathological. Hip hop artists spoke out against these superficial and stereotypical depictions, while also creating and promoting stories that revealed richer and deeper realities. As a part of these shifting processes of reception and production, Black youth regularly confronted and called out criminalization, as exemplified in the Public Enemy classic, "Don't Believe the Hype." Black male youth were the center of both processes, as the central characters depicted in mainstream images of violence and as the primary spokespeople in hip hop music.<sup>195</sup>

Why was it so vital that Black youth advance counter-narratives of violence within this climate of criminalization? The concept of epistemic violence helps us to answer to this question. Epistemic violence refers to the harms and injuries caused by

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<sup>195</sup> For this reason, my discussion of stock stories of criminalization as well as hip hop's concealed stories chiefly reflects the portrayals, experiences of perspectives of young Black men. Discussing the lack of early recorded albums by female emcees, Tricia Rose quotes female rapper Ms. Melodie as stating, "It wasn't that the male started rap, the male was just the first to be put on wax. Females were always into rap, and females always had their little crews and were always known for rockin' house parties and streets, or whatever, school yards, the corner, the park, whatever it was." Tricia Rose, "Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile," in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers), 237. The fact that young Black men continue to serve as the primary "spokespeople" within hip hop is related to a similar dynamic and does not reflect the actual participation of young Black women in hip hop music and culture.

the production and promotion of knowledge. The theoretical construct emerged most forcefully from postcolonial feminist theory, the same location where we find most scholarship on epistemic violence today.<sup>196</sup> For example, the article, “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil,” published in 2005, explains how representations of Afghani women in mainstream journalism and scholarship have supported and justified a neocolonial war that increases violence against Afghani women.<sup>197</sup> The authors, Kevin Ayotte and M.E. Husain, explain the central role that the production of hegemonic knowledge plays in processes of colonialism and conquest. However, epistemic violence also describes the harms and injuries caused by criminalization.

Criminalization is enacted and rationalized through a connected set of discursive logics, which impact groups in different ways.<sup>198</sup> I define discursive logics of criminalization as the ways in which various groups are differentially defined and

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<sup>196</sup> Although Michel Foucault addresses the presence of epistemic violence (or the violence of epistemes) in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, his discussion is not as well developed or contextualized as Gayatri Spivak’s theorization of epistemic violence in “Can the Subaltern Speak?.” Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1972); Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the interpretation of Culture* ed. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

<sup>197</sup> Kevin J. Ayotte and M.E. Husain, “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil,” *National Women’s Studies Association Journal* 17, No. 3 (Fall 2005), 112-133.

<sup>198</sup> My idea of discursive logics is especially informed by the work of Andrea Smith, an Indigenous feminist scholar, who theorized slavery, genocide and Orientalism as three distinct yet connected institutional logics of white supremacy. In “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing,” Smith states, “Because we are situated within different logics of white supremacy, we may misunderstand a racial dynamic if we simplistically try to explain one logic of white supremacy with another logic. For instance...if we simply dismiss Latino/as or Arab peoples as “white,” we fail to understand how a racial logic of Orientalism is in operation.” Andrea Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing,” in *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology*, ed. Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge: South End Press, 2006) 66 – 73. Building on Smith’s conceptual framework, I believe that people are also situated within differential logics of criminalization. For example, Arab people are criminalized through a dominant discourse that defines and portrays them as terrorists. This is quite different from how Black people are criminalized in the United States. People who share the same racial identification are also criminalized differently based on various dimensions of their identity such as class, gender, ethnicity, and generation.



portrayed as criminal through distinct yet interrelated discourses. In other words, criminalization occurs through a hegemonic process in which society comes to internalize the representations of a given group as “criminals” so much that these representations, including images and terminology, become a form of “common sense” that is rarely contested.<sup>199</sup> The discourse of “youth violence” has come to operate in such a way. Scholarship on racialized criminalization often addresses the intersections of class and gender, but does not adequately consider the lens of generation. This has made it more difficult to see the discourse of “youth violence” as a discourse of domination that promotes and sustains the criminalization and incarceration of youth. According to writers Ryan Pintado-Vertner and Jeff Chang:

During the early 1980s, the government declared a War on Drugs, and a host of repressive new laws took hold in communities of color. Many now question the effects of these laws. Prison expansion and racial profiling have started to come under sustained attack in recent years. Even General Barry McCaffrey, the White House drug czar, recently criticized discriminatory drug sentencing, saying, "It is clear that we cannot arrest our way out of the problem of chronic drug abuse and drug-driven crime." Yet one core aspect of the War on Drugs remains unchallenged -- the targeting of urban youth of color as superpredatory, ultraviolent, drug-infested gangbangers. Here, public opinion has been herded in quite the opposite direction – towards increasing fear.<sup>200</sup>

The discourse of “youth violence” has been consistently used to call for and justify practices and policies that bring Black youth as well as many other young people under the surveillance and control of the criminal legal system. These policies and practices include zero-tolerance policies in schools, curfews for teenagers, and

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<sup>199</sup> Here, I am employing Antonio Gramsci’s usage of the term, “common sense.” Gramsci defined common sense as “the diffuse, unco-ordinated [sic] features of a generic form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment.” Translators Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith have also summarized Gramsci’s definition of the term as “the incoherent set of generally held beliefs common to any given society.” Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 330 and 323, respectively.

<sup>200</sup> Ryan Pintado-Vertner and Jeff Chang, “The War on Youth,” *Colorlines Magazine*, Winter 1999. <http://www.colorlines.com/article.php?ID=332>.

constant police surveillance of young people at schools, housing projects, playgrounds, and on public transportation.<sup>201</sup> According to the logic of “youth violence,” it “makes sense” to incarcerate large numbers of Black youth, as well as other young people who are defined as violent within this discourse.

In *Framing Youth: Ten Myths about the Next Generation*, Mike Males carefully details how discourses of youth (and in particular Black male youth) as violent were created and spread by journalists, politicians and social scientists alike during the 1980s and 1990s – despite the facts that the rate of youth involvement in the government’s definition of violent crime has steadily decreased since the late 1970s and adults over 30 have always committed more homicides than young people.<sup>202</sup> Ann Hendrixson has traced the rapid rise of moral panics on “youth violence” to whites’ fears about rising numbers of young people of color. In fact, criminologist John DiIulio’s oft-quoted op-ed article, “The Coming of the Super-Predators,” used the rising demographic rates of young people of color, not crime rates, to predict “a sharp increase in the number of super crime-prone young males.”<sup>203</sup> Writing in 1995, DiIulio claimed,

Nationally, there are about 40 million children under the age of 10, the largest number in decades. By simple math, in a decade today’s 4- to 7- year olds will become 14-to 17-year olds. By 2005, the number of males in this age group

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<sup>201</sup> Playgrounds and public transportation are not as widely known as sites of police surveillance as much as schools and housing projects. However, I found it important to include them on this list partly based on my own observations and experiences. Nicole Fleetwood has also produced an excellent article on the criminalization of young people on public transit, in which she centers their resistance. Nicole Fleetwood, “Busing It” in *the City: Black Youth, Performance and Public Transit*, *TDR: The Drama Review* 48, No. 2 (2004), 33-48.

<sup>202</sup> Mike Males, “Myth: Teens are Violent Thugs,” in Mike Males, *Framing Youth: Ten Myths about the Next Generation* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1999)

<sup>203</sup> John J. DiIulio, Jr. “The Coming of the Super-Predators,” *The Weekly Standard* 1, No. 11 (1995) as quoted in Anne Hendrixson, “Superpredator Meets Teenage Mom: Exploding the Myth of the Out-of-Control Youth,” in *Policing the National Body: Race, Gender and Criminalization*, ed. Jael Silliman and Annanya Battacharjee (Cambridge: South End Press, 2002), 240-241.

will have risen about 25 percent overall and 50 percent for blacks ...On the horizon, therefore, are tens of thousands of several morally impoverished juvenile superpredators. . . So long as their youthful energies hold out, they will do what comes “naturally”: murder, rape, rob, assault, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, and get high.<sup>204</sup>

DiIulio has apologized for his mistaken predictions and the term, “superpredator” is no longer as common an element within the discourse of “youth violence” as it was throughout the 1990s<sup>205</sup> However, the discourse of “youth violence” is still largely constituted by the same images invoked by the term, “superpredator.”<sup>206</sup> These are the very same images that were increasingly circulated on television beginning in the late 1970s.

One exemplar is “Youth Terror: A View From Behind the Gun,” a made for television documentary produced by ABC News that aired in June 1978. In a review of the program, *Time Magazine* called it a show not to be missed:

This documentary on teen-age crime, a segment in the "ABC News Closeup" series, may be the most disturbing and dramatic news program ever seen on American commercial television. It is certainly the most explicit. The network recommends "parental discretion" in the opening credits, and as the show unfolds, that cliché takes on new meaning. There is graphic violence, to be sure: bloodied heads; a lone youth being attacked by three others, one of them swinging a baseball bat; an unflinching look at a junkie mainlining. And the street toughs and ghetto dwellers who provide the sole narration converse in four-and twelve-letter words that many movie theaters, not to mention TV sets, have never amplified. To view and hear all this is not easy, but it should not be missed; parental discretion is a poor reason for dissuading people from seeing what a lack of parental discretion has helped to create. ... Equally shocking are the voices of the hoodlums. They seem at first to be speaking another language, easily recounting acts of aggression and mayhem that might

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<sup>204</sup> John DiIulio, “Moral Poverty,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 16, 1995 as quoted in Mike Males, Mike Males, “Myth: Teens are Violent Thugs,” in Mike Males, *Framing Youth: Ten Myths about the Next Generation*, (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1999), 50.

<sup>205</sup> Mary Ann Meyers, “John DiIulio Gets Religion,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 1997. Article <http://www.upenn.edu/gazette/1097/dool.html>

<sup>206</sup> I use the term, “peer violence” to refer to violence that people of the same generation and gender commit against one another. I use the term, “violence against youth,” to broadly refer to all harms and injuries against young people, including violence committed against young people by adults and institutions. Both of these terms provide useful alternatives to the general phrase, “youth violence.”

give even hardened criminals pause. Asked why an ice pick was his preferred weapon in a previous assault, a thin, pale, seemingly fragile boy chuckles and answers, "Internal bleeding."<sup>207</sup>

The reviewer Paul Gray understood the violence among youth depicted in the film as “the effects of poverty, racism and some ineradicable germ of human ignorance,” noting,

“The more they talk, the less monstrous they become: ‘I wouldn't mind goin' to school if I knew how to read . . . My dreams scare me ... I want somebody to know I been here . . . I can't do nothing. I can't function.’”<sup>208</sup>

However, the more that images of violent youth circulated in the mainstream media, the less that journalists referenced oppression or included the voices of young people.

Hip hop was created in this cultural landscape – a landscape characterized by representations of Black youth as pathological, deviant, and violent. Thus, it is no surprise that young people would engage with and against these representations in the media that they created. Through hip hop, Black youth told stories to one another other, their communities and the nation at large that starkly contrasted with the stock stories told in articles, reports, and studies on “youth violence” and “the underclass.”<sup>209</sup> These narratives exist alongside and in contention with the stock stories told by the news media, as well as other mainstream and dominant sources of knowledge. Whereas mainstream narratives cited murder and shootings as the predominant forms of violence in Black communities, hip hop artists cited the violence of political and economic policies and practices. Whereas mainstream

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<sup>207</sup> Paul Gray, “Television: No Limits” (A Review of *Youth Terror: A View From Behind the Gun*) ABC, June 28. *Times Magazine*. Monday, July 3, 1978.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Examples include William Julius Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1978) and Ken Auletta’s *The Underclass* (1983), the latter which began as a series of articles in *The New Yorker*. Brett Williams, “Poverty among African Americans in the Urban United States.” *Human Organization* Vol. 51 No. 2, 1992.

narratives dehumanized the people that they portrayed as violent, hip hop artists provided compassionate representations of people engaged in harm. While mainstream narratives pointed to a deviant oppositional culture as the reason for peer violence among youth, hip hop artists pointed to multiple factors, including anger and emotional pain. The narratives expressed through hip hop music also emphasized youths' political agency, capacity for intellectual analysis and participation in collective resistance. In the sections that follow, I contextualize and analyze hip hop songs recorded in the 1980s and early 1990s to illustrate how young people advanced these critical understandings.

### *Narratives Exposing Political Economic Violence*

Police harassment and brutality are by far the most popular topics within hip hop music that provides a critical analysis of violence.<sup>210</sup> Tricia Rose explores this issue in depth in “Prophets of Rage,” a chapter in her foundational work, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture on Contemporary America*.<sup>211</sup> According to Rose, “Police brutality, racism and harassment form the political core of male rappers’ social criticism, and lyrics that effectively and cleverly address these issues carry a great deal of social weight in rap music.” Rather than reiterate the analysis that Rose and other cultural critics have offered on critiques of police harassment and brutality in hip hop, I build on their analysis by exploring other dimensions of artists’ interrogations of violence. In this first section, I show how early hip hop artists expose political economic policies and practices as causes and sources of violence.

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<sup>210</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994)

<sup>211</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994)

As an example, I discuss and analyze the classic song, “The Message,” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released in 1982.<sup>212</sup>

Often identified as the earliest political rap song and the most influential, “The Message” can easily be called the anthem of black working-class communities in the 1980s. Primarily rapped by lead writer and emcee Melle Mel (Melvin Glover), “The Message” uses a series of stories, told in the past, present and future tense, to depict the impact of political economic policies on working-class Black communities.<sup>213</sup> The song also articulates a commitment to survival in the face of unemployment, racism, police brutality, rising drug addiction, poor education and pervasive poverty.

Repeating the chorus:

Don’t push me, cause I’m close to the edge  
I’m trying not to lose my head  
It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder  
How I keep from going under<sup>214</sup>

Melle Mel narrates the economic problems facing the Black working class and the considerable stress caused by these seemingly impossible conditions:

I can’t take the smell, I can’t take the noise  
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice  
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back  
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat  
I tried to get away, but I don’t get far  
Cause the man with the tow-truck repossessed my car...<sup>215</sup>

The second verse describes a mentally ill woman living on the street and eating out of garbage cans and another woman who turns to prostitution and attains a pimp for

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<sup>212</sup> Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message,” *The Message*, Dbk Works, 1982.

<sup>213</sup> One verse is also contributed by Duke Bootee who was not a member of the group, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five at that time, but a member of the house band for Sugar Hill Records, the record label that released “The Message,” as well as other albums by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. In the music video for “The Message,” Duke Bootee’s verse is lip synched by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five member, Rahiem.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

survival. In the third verse, the narrator describes life inside his home, beginning with his brother who was “doin [so] bad,” he “stole [their] mother’s TV.” Naming “bill collectors...., a bum education, double-digit inflation,” and “a strike at the station,” as well as several health conditions, the narrative builds up to the final exclaim, “Sometimes I think I’m going insane / I swear I might hijack a plane!”<sup>216</sup> With these words, Melle Mel poignantly voices the plight of urban communities in the 1980s that resulted from “Reagonomics,” a particularly potent introduction of neoliberal policies.

Neoliberalism refers to a political economic philosophy characterized by the belief in the total “liberation” or freedom of the market. In other words, the purpose of neoliberal economic policies is to “free” markets to operate competitively without “interference” from government regulation or concerns about social welfare. Through processes such as privatization and deregulation, neoliberalism economic policies increase the power and influence of corporations and wealth holders while reducing the power of governments, unions, workers, and ordinary citizens. While “liberating” the market to facilitate the accumulation of capital, neoliberalism also curtails the government’s ability to provide for the welfare of the public by drastically decreasing or eliminating social services and emphasizing individual property and responsibilities over public property and the collective good.<sup>217</sup> In 1979, Paul Volcker, the newly installed head of the U.S. Federal Reserve, reoriented U.S. monetary policy using a neoliberal framework to keep inflation down.<sup>218</sup> The next

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>218</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1.

year, Ronald Reagan became President, cementing the transition to a fiscal and monetary plan that would come to be called Reagonomics.<sup>219</sup>

Under Reagan, neoliberal fiscal policy replaced Keynesianism, an approach to political economic policy that emphasizes government regulation of corporations and international trade as well as government stimulation to achieve full employment as the keys to economic growth. Named for economist John Maynard Keynes and introduced in the U.S. shortly after the depression of the 1930s, Keynesianism regulated market excesses and deficiencies and provided a social safety net in the form of a public welfare system. Directed by this approach, the government regulated industry, standardized wages, and mediated between labor unions and corporate owners. The move from Keynesianism to neoliberalism in the late 1970s was a reaction to increasing global competition from Europe and Japan.<sup>220</sup> The abandonment of Keynesianism was also precipitated by a growing decrease in wealth disparity and a backlash against the visible struggles and victories of post World War II liberation movements.<sup>221</sup> The harms to working class communities of color as a result of neoliberalism was thus no accident, but an intentional decision to neglect and abandon the well-being of the masses in order to attend to the accumulation of wealth for the elite.<sup>222</sup> “The Message” reflects and narrates this political economic reality, while incorporating related and intersecting dimensions including the education

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<sup>219</sup> Monetary policy specifically refers to the manipulation of the supply and creation of money; Fiscal policy refers to all other political economic policies. Personal communication with political economist Jessica Gordon Nembhard, October 2009.

<sup>220</sup> Rhonda Williams, "If You're Black, Get Back; If You're Brown, Stick Around; If You're White, Hang Tight: Race, Gender and Work in the Global Economy." Working Paper. (Washington, D.C.: Preamble Center, 2000)

<sup>221</sup> George Lipsitz, *American Studies In a Moment of Danger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>222</sup> This policy worked well as wealth inequality increased from the 1980s through 2008, except for a slight slowing down at the end of the 1990s.



system's disregard for urban youth and the relegation of people of color to menial jobs, if any at all. The lyrics also draw connections between this context and interpersonal violence:

My son said," Daddy I don't wanna go to school  
Cause the teachers a jerk, he must think I'm a  
Fool  
And all the kids smoke reefer, I think it'd be cheaper  
If I just got a job, learned to be a street sweeper  
I'd dance to the beat, shuffle my feet  
Wear a shirt and tie and run with the creeps  
Cause its all about money, ain't a damn thing  
Funny  
You got to have a con in this land of milk and  
Honey  
They pushed that girl in front of the train  
Took her to the doctor, sewed her arm on again  
Stabbed that man right in his heart  
Gave him a transplant for a brand new start  
I can't walk through the park, cause it's crazy after dark  
Keep my hand on my gun, cause they got me on the run  
I feel like a outlaw, broke my last glass jaw  
Hear them say: "You want some more?" livin' on a seesaw<sup>223</sup>

These verses provide a jarring juxtaposition of multiple forms of harm and injury, beginning with the violence of an inadequate educational system. Demeaning interactions with school teachers and persistent poverty in a land of great wealth influence the narrator's son to consider dropping out of school and acquiring a job as a "street sweeper," or drug dealer. Two individuals are medically repaired after being brutally assaulted, but fear and disparity continue to fester.

One of the strongest theoretical contributions that "The Message" makes to our understanding of violence is an explanation of what I am calling neoliberal criminalization. Neoliberal criminalization facilitates interpersonal harm and other kinds of lawbreaking through neoliberal political economic policies, while

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<sup>223</sup> Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, "The Message," *The Message*, Dbk Works, 1982.

simultaneously naming members of certain communities as criminals, regardless of their participation in lawbreaking. The last and longest verse of “The Message,” provides a detailed narrative that explains the multi-faceted violence of neoliberal criminalization. This narrative follows the life of a Black boy from birth to death moving between first and second person:

“A child was born, with no state of mind  
Blind to the ways of mankind”

But after he must “grow in the ghetto, living second rate,” he dreams of escaping poverty. However, his only hope of obtaining money seems to be the underground economy.

“You’ll admire all the number book takers  
Thugs, pimps, pushers and the big money makers.”

The boy soon drops out of high school, and is without a job, so he begins to rob people and gets caught.

“Turned stickup kid, look what you done did  
Got sent up for an eight year bid”

During his first two years in prison, he is continuously raped and finally killed.

“Being used and abused, and served like hell  
Till one day you was find hung dead in a cell”

This narrative, like others in “The Message,” is not intended to offer a message of hope, but to reframe and revision dominant portrayals and explanations of “urban violence,” while publicly articulating a collective critique that emerges from urban communities.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Interestingly, this last narrative in “The Message,” was the first verse written for the song, although it was placed as the last verse in the song. In 1979, Melle Mel shared the same verse on a song called, “Superrappin,” the first release after Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were initially signed to a record label.

Tricia Rose has written of “rap’s capacity as a form of testimony, as an articulation of a young Black urban critical voice of social protest.”<sup>225</sup> “The Message” both exemplifies and introduces this capacity to a mass audience. The song went platinum within a month of its release on a 12” record in the summer of 1982, and quickly topped the Billboard charts. But, these accolades do not capture the song’s impact as much as the testimonies of hip hop artists including Chuck D and Common who have said that “The Message” strengthened their political consciousness and was the first time that they heard the conditions of Black, urban communities accurately described and depicted for a national audience.<sup>226</sup> Hip hop songs in this tradition have continued the critical practice of identifying a primary source of interpersonal harm as the violence of neoliberal criminalization. Another example is KRS-One’s 1988 song, “Stop the Violence,” of which Tricia Rose has written,

For KRS-One, young black teenage males killing each other and their neighbors are acts of violence, but they are not any more violent than the federal government’s abandonment of black and Hispanic Vietnam veterans and billion-dollar expenditures for weapons while “his family eats gristle”; no more violent than the educational system’s historical narratives that “will not speak upon political crooks,” giving the green light to tomorrow’s generation of political criminals. . . . What he does quite effectively . . . is to illustrate the self destructive nature of crime among black teenagers without identifying black teenagers as the problem. KRS-One’s “Stop the Violence” contextualizes these crimes as an outgrowth of the immense institutional forces that foster such behaviors. In this version, individual agency and structural oppression are in tension. Finally, unlike many social scientists, he bypasses the culture of poverty trap as an explanation for contemporary inequality and the conditions it fosters.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 145.

<sup>226</sup> Quincy QD3 Jones III, “Hip Hop & Politics – Melle Mel’s The Message,” [Online video.] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLWiWIALVm0>.

<sup>227</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 143 – 144..

One of our continued challenges – as scholars and cultural critics – is to maintain this dual focus on individual agency and structural oppression, particularly in relation to discussions of interpersonal violence. Hip hop music from the 1980s and early 90s provides us with useful lessons. Through hip hop, young people consistently named the violence of political economic policies within their analysis of violence, providing a critical understanding of structural oppression.

Many narratives that exposed structural violence have also provided an important analysis of the complex intersectionality of violence. These narratives provide expansive theories of what accounts for violence, moving beyond the conventional understanding of violence as direct, physical harm. In their songs, rappers emphasized the existence of multiple and overlapping forms of violence operating at national, international, and local levels, while identifying the state as the primary source of violence. This analysis was primarily promoted within the subgenre of hip hop known as “gangsta rap,” and especially exemplified in the work of Ice T.

Tracy Marrow, better known as Ice T, was one of the first popular gangsta rappers and a cogent theorist of violence. Inspired by the writings of Ice Berg Slim, Marrow named himself Ice Tray, which he later shortened to Ice T. Marrow’s analysis of incarceration and violence was shaped by his experiences in and out of prison during early adulthood, membership in the Crips, a short stint in the army, and constant confrontations with police. Grounded in the Black working class neighborhoods of Los Angeles, his early lyrics demonstrate a critical awareness of state-sponsored violence on domestic and international fronts. Ice T’s stories reveal a

wide range of forms and sources of violence, as well as the multiple connections and intersections among them.

In 1984, Ice T released the song, “Killers.”<sup>228</sup> While stories covered in the mainstream media primarily implicated young, Black men as killers, this song implicates police officers, wealthy women, Vietnam veterans, politicians and American soldiers. Ice T also demonstrates that it is possible to report “killing” without discussing the kinds of murder popularly associated with Black youth in poor and working class communities. In ten carefully crafted stanzas, Ice T tells the stories of ten who have killed:

a recent police academy graduate who murders a child,

“Three weeks on the beat and his weak nerves crack  
And fires four warning shots into a kid’s back”

a young woman who kills her rich, old husband for his money:

“The girl said he would be hard to forget  
As the papers interviewed her while she flew his jet”

a man who kills his wife, children and himself after getting fired from his job:

“Shots burst out from a loaded twelve-gauge  
They call it mass murder, suicide  
BUT SOMEBODY TELL ME WHY THE KIDS HAD TO DIE”

a Vietnam veteran who kills people from the top off a roof, frustrated with his inability to get even low-wage employment:

“Ten people died on a sunny day  
BUT TELL ME WHO TAUGHT HIM HOW TO SHOOT THAT WAY”

a governor who executes a man in prison:

“He tries to fight execution with petitions and pleas  
And a pardon from the governor is all he needs”

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<sup>228</sup> Ice T, “Killers,” *Killers/ Body Rock*, Electrobeat Records, 1984. The *Killers/ Body Rock* album was released as a 12” in 1984 and 1985 by the same record label.

a liquor store clerk who kills a man who robs his store,

“But before Georgie-Porgie could get away  
The man pulled out his gun and blew him away”

and politicians who use the public’s tax dollars to pay for war:

“Nuclear supremacy is the ultimate thrill  
So our tax we pay is paid for overkill.”<sup>229</sup>

The chorus that repeats and connects each story simultaneously convicts, questions and urges,

“KILLERS! These are the killers  
KILLERS! They are the killers  
KILLERS! Are you a killer?  
KILLERS! Don’t be a killer”

and the last stanza demands an end to the violence:

“It’s time for all to work together for peace  
‘Cause everybody’s doomed if the killings don’t cease  
Street homicide, war, it’s all the same  
‘Cause murder is murder by any name”<sup>230</sup>

Ice T’s treatment of violence in “Killers” makes it clear that fatal violence is committed by people of various demographic groups, including and perhaps especially caretakers of the state. While the first story and last story reference state-sponsored in the form of police murder and war, most of the narratives in between also implicate the state as the primary source of violence. For example, the Vietnam Veteran’s random murder of ten people is facilitated by his abandonment by the government and enabled by his government training to shoot and kill.

The narratives within “Killers” also establish multiple linkages among economic and interpersonal violence, and critiques economic violence as a foundation

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<sup>229</sup> Ice T, “Killers,” *Killers/ Body Rock*, Electrobeat Records, 1984.

<sup>230</sup> Ice T, “Killers,” *Killers/ Body Rock*, Electrobeat Records, 1984.

of interpersonal violence. The song critiques policies that prevent veterans from finding even unskilled employment, curtail youths' willing participation in the labor force, train police officers and soldiers to kill, inspire lust for money in a scandalously uneven economy, and mandate murder for the purposes of punishment and imperial conquest. This, according to Ice T, constitutes violence and creates the conditions for additional violence. The killers that Ice T describes are also fully human, in contrast to the metonymic messages of murderers as monsters common in television and newspapers of the 1980s and even today. For example, even the police officer who kills a child is introduced as a talented young man who enrolls in the police academy after seeing an ad on television. Ice T also contextualizes the police officer's murder of a young child by explaining that the officer's "weak nerves crack[ed]" after only three weeks on the force.<sup>231</sup> This demonstrated commitment to compassionate representation is an important component of the concealed stories of violence within early hip hop music. In the next section, I discuss the assertion of compassion as an ideological perspective germane to many critical representations of violence within hip hop. According to this critical practice, young hip hop artists told stories that provided compassionate portrayals of people engaged in harmful acts and demonized or pathologized in stock stories.

### *Narratives Asserting Compassion*

Dominant representations of the Black working-class in the mid 1980s through early 90s were primarily shaped by two interrelated factors – the militarization of poor, urban neighborhoods and the War on Drugs. In the 1960s and

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<sup>231</sup> Ice T, "Killers," *Killers/ Body Rock*, Electrobeat Records, 1984.

1970s, the United States government employed domestic militarization in their efforts to contain the urban poor, just as it used violent force to repress movements and governments outside of U.S. borders that threatened U.S. financial interests. In the 1960s and 70s, these policies were directly aimed at containing urban rebellion and dismantling progressive social movements. In the 1980s, the social control policies enshrined by President Richard Nixon and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in the early 1970s continued in conjunction with the growth and goals of the new neoliberal state. According to geographer David Harvey, a neoliberal state is “a state apparatus whose fundamental mission was to facilitate the conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital.”<sup>232</sup>

The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence [sic], police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force, if need be, the proper functioning of markets. ... The freedoms [the neoliberal state] embodies reflect the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital.<sup>233</sup>

As an ideological state apparatus and network of corporations, the corporate media also reflected these interests in their coverage of poor, urban areas.

Mainstream media coverage of poor, Black communities from the mid 1980s to early 1990s was characterized by one topic more than any other – crack cocaine.

From the opening shots in 1986 to President Bush’s national address in 1989, and through all the stories about “crack babies” in 1990 and 1991, politicians and the media depicted crack as supremely evil – *the* most important cause of America’s problems.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Craig Reinerman and Harry Gene Levine, *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 24



Cocaine, a drug that was previously exclusive to rich, white users was introduced to poor, communities of color after the price of cocaine dropped in the 1970s. Crack cocaine, a cheaper, less pure form of cocaine was developed in order to address the shrinkage in the price of powder cocaine as well as expand the market for the drug overall.<sup>235</sup> Unemployment rates had plummeted for Black youth, with the rates of unemployment for young Black men ranging from 45 – 60% in most large urban cities.<sup>236</sup> This left members of this demographic particularly vulnerable and primed to become peddlers of crack cocaine in their neighborhoods.

Rather than expose the structural roots of illegal drug sales or drug use in Black communities, the mainstream media demonized Black drug dealers and users – in close cooperation with the Reagan and Bush administrations. For example, on a 1989 episode of *The Larry King Show*, Reagan’s drug czar William Bennett shared that while it would be difficult to do so legally, he sees no moral problem with beheading drug dealers.<sup>237</sup> To dehumanize means to “deprive of human qualities such as individuality, compassion, or civility.”<sup>238</sup> Without a doubt, dehumanization accurately describes this coverage.<sup>239</sup> According to criminologists Craig Reinarmine and Harry Gene Levine, the “lifetime prevalence of cocaine use among young people (the percentage of those twelve through twenty-five year olds who have ‘ever’ tried it) peaked in 1982, four years before the [crack] scare began, and continued to decline

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<sup>235</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>236</sup> Michael A. Stoll, “The Black Youth Employment Problem Revisited” in *African Americans in the U.S. Economy*, ed. Cecilia Conrad, John Whitehead, Patrick Mason, and James Stewart (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

<sup>237</sup> Clarence Lusane, *Pipe Dream Blues: Racism and the War on Drugs*, (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 74.

<sup>238</sup> The Free Dictionary, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/dehumanize>.

<sup>239</sup> This definition of dehumanization also suggests, somewhat ironically, that the speakers of this rhetoric and discourse were also dehumanizing themselves.

after that.”<sup>240</sup> However, most media coverage reflected a completely opposite reality. The mass media waged a discursive assault on Black youth and Black working-class communities. This coverage promoted and justified the militarization of poor, Black, urban neighborhoods by exploiting neighborhood problems with crack cocaine.<sup>241</sup>

Young people’s narratives were impacted by these dominant depictions. In fact, according to renowned cultural critic Greg Tate, hip hop’s necessity was born from a context of dehumanization. In an article in *The Village Voice*, Tate surmises,

“But the Negro art form we call hip hop wouldn't even exist if African Americans of whatever socioeconomic caste weren't still niggers and not just the more benign, congenial "niggas." By which I mean if we weren't all understood by the people who run this purple-mountain loony bin as both subhuman and superhuman, as sexy beasts on the order of King Kong. Or as George Clinton once observed, without the humps there ain't no getting over.”<sup>242</sup>

It would be a serious error to suggest that young people created stories for the sole purpose of revising the master narratives’ dehumanizing and demonizing transcripts. Rather, concealed stories on a range of topics related to violence, including the impact of crack cocaine, often reflected youths’ urgent need to speak out about their concerns. The song, “I Cram to Understand U (Sam),” reflects this objective, while inserting the humanity missing from mainstream portrayals at the height of the “crack scare.”<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Craig Reinerman and Harry Gene Levine, *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>241</sup> Craig Reinerman and Harry Gene Levine, *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 24

<sup>242</sup> Greg Tate, “Hip Hop Turns 30? Whatcha Celebratin For?” *The Village Voice*. January 4, 2005.

<sup>243</sup> Reinerman and Levine put the term, “crack scare” in quotes to emphasize the exaggerated nature of most representations and discourse of crack cocaine use and addiction in the U.S. at this time. Craig Reinerman and Harry Gene Levine, *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

“I Cram to Understand U (Sam)” is a song about a young woman who comes to discover that the guy she has been dating is addicted to crack cocaine.<sup>244</sup> M.C. Lyte (Lana Moorer) said she wrote the song when she was 12 years old and first recorded it at 14.<sup>245</sup> M.C. Lyte recorded the final version at the age of 16 with the assistance of her brothers, Milk and Giz, who made up the hip hop group, Audio 2. Released in 1987, the record, “I Cram to Understand U (Sam)” was M.C. Lyte’s first single. The song opens with Lyte’s tender expression, “I used to be in love with this guy named Sam,” although she can not explain why. During the song, M.C. Lyte as narrator and subject tells the story of her relationship with Sam who she suspects is cheating on her with another girl only to find out in the end:

“And as for this girl, Miss C, oh well  
I was shocked as hell when I heard, Samuel  
When your homeboys told me, I almost went wack.  
That the girl you was addicted to, her name was Crack.”<sup>246</sup>

Lyte begins the song with the story of how she first met Sam through his brother at the roller disco on Brooklyn’s Empire Boulevard in 1981,

“So Jerry introduced Sam and I that night  
He said, “Hello, my name is Sam” I said, ‘Hi, my name is Lyte’”<sup>247</sup>

The song ends with Sam and Lyte back at the roller rink, but by this time she has acknowledged his addiction and broken up with him, and he is trying to meet other girls.

“And now I see you in Empire every Sunday  
Juicin the girls up for some money and a lay

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<sup>244</sup> M.C. Lyte and D.J. K-Rock, “I Cram To Understand U (Sam),” *I Cram To Understand U (Sam)*, First Priority Music, 1987.

<sup>245</sup> Andres Tardio, “M.C. Lyte: Shining Lyte,” HiphopDx.com, July 27, 2009. <http://www.hiphopdx.com/index/features/id.1383/title.mc-lyte-shining-lyte>.

M.C. Lyte and D.J. K-Rock, “I Cram To Understand U (Sam),” *I Cram To Understand U (Sam)*, First Priority Music, 1987.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

But every time I see you doin it, I just ruin it  
Tell em how ya on crack, smoke, sniff, chewin it.”<sup>248</sup>

The chorus rapped between each verse simply says, “Just like a test / Just like a test /  
Just like a test, I cram to understand you.”

In a review of M.C. Lyte’s compilation album, *The Very Best of M.C. Lyte*, Mark Anthony Neal called the song “I Cram to Understand U” one of the first tracks written for the “crack age.”<sup>249</sup> Avoiding popular images of the violent feenin’ “crackhead” Lyte reveals a young man, as a brother and a boyfriend, who is not easily identifiable as someone who is using crack cocaine. While she does not demonize or label him, she not only decides that a relationship with him is not for her, but commits herself to warning other girls about his habit so that they can steer clear of a relationship with him. In a July 2009 interview with Andres Tardio of HipHopDX.com, M.C. Lyte explained that the story she tells in “I Cram to Understand U,” like other stories shared through her raps, is not a direct reflection of her own experiences, but a fictional representation of reality:

You know, I felt like I was speaking for an entire generation. No, I can’t say that I was ever involved with a guy who was addicted to crack like “Sam” was nor did I see a guy (“Poor Georgie”) who drank and drove, smoked, got cancer and died in a car crash. Like, I mean, how bad can it get? Those circumstances weren’t real for me but I am a storyteller. So, what I did was take things that are real to people.<sup>250</sup>

M.C. Lyte’s counter-narratives portray the conflicts and troubles of everyday people.

“I Cram to Understand U” provides a compassionate representation of a person addicted to crack cocaine and the many people that are apart of his life. But, it

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, “M.C. Lyte: The Very Best of M.C. Lyte,” *Popmatters.com*, September 3, 2001. <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/lytemc.very/>.

<sup>250</sup> Andres Tardio, “M.C. Lyte: Shining Lyte,” *HiphopDx.com*, July 27, 2009. <http://www.hiphopdx.com/index/features/id.1383/title.mc-lyte-shining-lyte>.

is also a warning about blind love and a lesson in community accountability. In the second verse, Lyte describes how several girls approach her when she is out with Sam to tell her that he is selling crack. They warn her to watch out before she ends up in a relationship with a “fiend.” She tells them to shut up and mind their own business. Later, after she has finally faced the truth of his intimate involvement with the drug, the narrator interrupts Sam’s conversations with other girls to give them a similar warning. While the news media’s stories of crack cocaine addiction centered on the punitive interventions of the police, the interventions played out in “I Cram to Understand U,” focus on the concerned interference of friends and strangers who want to reduce and prevent the harms that can result from intimate involvement with harmful drugs and people addicted to them. They do not isolate Sam, but seek to protect women who could end up emotionally harmed or financially exploited while dating him.

M.C. Lyte’s “I Cram to Understand U (Sam),” was an early example in a long tradition of hip hop-based stories that provided complex and compassionate representations of people pathologized in the mainstream media. “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” the acclaimed debut single by Tupac Shakur released in 1991, is a later example.<sup>251</sup> The well-known song tells the heart-wrenching story of a twelve year old girl with a baby. Brenda tries to abandon her baby in a dumpster after giving birth alone on a bathroom floor, but she is unable to leave her baby behind; “it hurts to hear her calling.”<sup>252</sup> Tupac also shares that Brenda – who has a distant relationship with her mother and whose dad is a heroin addict – was molested by her older cousin. The

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<sup>251</sup> 2Pac, “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” *2Pacalypse Now*, Priority Records, 1991.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

cousin leaves her; her mother rejects her, and the government fails to assist her. After being kicked out of her house, “she tried to sell crack, but ends up getting robbed.” With “nothing left to sell,” Brenda turns to selling sex and soon ends up dead. “Prostitute, found slain, and Brenda’s her name, she’s got a baby.”<sup>253</sup> Unlike “I Cram to Understand U,” which tells an entirely fictional story, the story told in “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” is partly biographical.

The music video for “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” opens with “Based on a True Story,” at the bottom of the screen.<sup>254</sup> Tupac reportedly wrote the song after reading a newspaper story about a twelve-year-old girl who puts her newborn baby in an incinerator, and whose cousin is the father of the child. Tupac’s retelling of this story in “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” communicates pain and despair, where others might see pathology. The narrative sharply diverges from stock stories of teenage mothers and abandoned babies, challenging these stereotypical and disparaging portrayals with complex awareness and empathy. “Brenda’s Got a Baby” also suggests that compassionate counter-narratives enable us to see the impact of trauma and the presence of resilience.

### *Narratives Calling for Help, Healing and Resistance*

When we review scholarship from the 1990s that sought to explain interpersonal violence among youth, we will often see epistemic violence at work. Elijah Anderson, a well-known sociologist now at Yale University, wrote that conditions that cause considerable stress to African-American youth in poor, urban areas lead them to adopt an oppositional culture, or “code of the street,” characterized

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> 2Pac, “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” Priority Records, 1995. [Music video].

by aggression and violence.<sup>255</sup> Anderson defined the code of the street as “a set of informal rules governing public interpersonal behavior, particularly violence.”<sup>256</sup> Even youth who have not adopted “the code” must follow “the code” in order to maintain their respect.<sup>257</sup> In March 2009, Yale announced that Anderson’s explanation for interpersonal violence among “black inner city youths” was adopted by the U.S. Department of Justice.<sup>258</sup> According to the Yale Office of Public Affairs, “This validation means that the Code of the Street thesis now stands to influence how policy makers and criminal courts evaluate inner city violence.”<sup>259</sup> As solutions to the problems described in his research, Anderson suggested increasing educational and labor market opportunities such as early education programs and quality jobs in poor, urban areas. If followed, this plan would most likely lead to improved

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<sup>255</sup> These conditions include racial discrimination, lack of jobs, and mistreatment or neglect by authority figures including police officers, teachers, and others. Elijah Anderson, “The Code of the Streets,” *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1994, 80-94; Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

<sup>256</sup> Elijah Anderson, “The Code of the Streets,” *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1994, 80; Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 33.

<sup>257</sup> Elijah Anderson, “The Code of the Streets,” *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1994, 80-94; Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

<sup>258</sup> The National Institute of Justice is the research agency of the U.S. Department of Justice. In February 2009, the National Institute of Justice released a research brief based on interviews with approximately 800 African-American youth and their primary caregivers in 1997 and 1999. According to the authors, this research affirmed Anderson’s “code of the street” thesis as the primary explanation for interpersonal violence among African-American youth. The research brief also supported Anderson’s contention that youth are less likely to adopt the “code of the street” if they belong to “decent families – families who “value hard work and self-reliance, and encourage their children to avoid trouble, [who] tend to accept mainstream values and try to instill these values in their children” – and are more likely to adopt the “code of the street” if they belong to “street families – [families who] have lives that are disorganized and filled with anger, hostility, physical altercations and other anti-social behaviors...frequently engage in ineffective parenting strategies, such as yelling, poor supervision, verbal insults, and the harsh and inconsistent discipline entrenched in the code of the street.” Eric A Stewart and Ronald L. Simons, “The Code of the Street and African American Adolescent Violence,” (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice, February 2009), 4, 6-7. Although the report indicates that “Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice” the report is an official publication and product of the National Institute of Justice.

<sup>259</sup> Yale University Office of Public Affairs, “Seminal Study on Urban Violence by Yale Professor Adopted by U.S. Justice Department,” March 3, 2009, <http://opa.yale.edu/news/article.aspx?id=6458>.

conditions. Yet, I wonder if Anderson considered how the entirety of his work could help, harm, or destroy people's lives. Did he consider how his arguments might shape the policies, practices and perceptions that impact whole families – or even a single young person? Did he consider how his depictions could determine the existence of entire communities?

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has cited William Julius Wilson's "concentration of poverty" thesis as the rationale for the development and implementation of HOPE IV, a federal program responsible for the destruction of public housing communities across the U.S. since 1992.<sup>260</sup> HOPE VI (the Housing Opportunities for Everyone program) is largely based on Wilson's argument that large numbers of poor people living together in one place (i.e. "concentrated poverty") is responsible for the continued persistence of poverty, as well as a range of social and behavioral problems, including criminality and violence. To facilitate the "deconcentration of poverty," Hope VI provides grants for public housing authorities to demolish public housing developments and construct new mixed income housing developments.<sup>261</sup> The mixed income housing includes public housing and private market-rate developments, but does not mandate one-to-one

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<sup>260</sup> The National Commission on Severely Distressed Public housing, appointed in 1987, developed the urban revitalization demonstration program, which became HOPE VI. Larry Bennett, Janet L. Smith, and Patricia A. Wright, eds. *Where are Poor People to Live?: Transforming Public Housing Communities*. (Armonke, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006); Winton Pitcoff, "New Hope for Public Housing?" Shelterforce Online. Issue #104, March/April 1999. Montclair, NJ: National Housing Institute. <http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/104/pitcoff.html>. Wilson's concentration of poverty thesis was published in his 1987 book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*. William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>261</sup> Some grants are also provided to rehabilitate existing units, but most grants are for demolition and redevelopment. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), "Hope VI," U.S. Department on Housing and Urban Development. <http://www.hud.gov/offices/pih/programs/ph/hope6/>



replacement of the homes that have been demolished.<sup>262</sup> Although Wilson did not recommend the mass demolition of public housing in his research, his theories have taken on the tone of religious ideology in the mouths of federal housing officials, for-profit developers and the staff of public housing authorities as they carry out HOPE VI. Wilson's ideas and methods have also influenced countless scholars of the "urban underclass," including Elijah Anderson.

Elijah Anderson's "code of the street" thesis was first published in an essay called, "The Code of the Streets," in 1994; *The Atlantic Monthly* featured the essay as the cover story for its May 1994 issue.<sup>263</sup> Anderson's book, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, was published five years later.<sup>264</sup> The book has been so widely acclaimed and employed— in scholarly discourse, newspaper and magazine reviews, television programs, and course syllabi — that a wide variety of professionals who work with African American youth in urban communities are familiar with his ideas. Critics of Anderson's arguments,

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<sup>262</sup> The "concentration of poverty" thesis was successfully used by the Clinton administration and Congress to repeal the federal statute that required one-to-one replacement of demolished public housing units. Larry Bennett, Janet L. Smith, and Patricia A. Wright, eds. *Where are Poor People to Live?: Transforming Public Housing Communities*. (Armonke, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

<sup>263</sup> Elijah Anderson, "The Code of the Streets," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1994, 80-94. In this essay, Anderson first explained his famous "code of the street" thesis: "Of all the problems besetting the poor inner-city black community, none is more pressing than that of interpersonal violence and aggression.... Muggings, burglaries, carjackings, and drug-related shootings, all of which may leave their victims or innocent bystanders dead, are now common enough to concern all urban and many suburban residents. The inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor--the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, the stigma of race, the fallout from rampant drug use and drug trafficking, and the resulting alienation and lack of hope for the future. Simply living in such an environment places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior. Although there are often forces in the community which can counteract the negative influences, by far the most powerful being a strong, loving, "decent" (as inner-city residents put it) family committed to middle-class values, the despair is pervasive enough to have spawned an oppositional culture, that of "the streets," whose norms are often consciously opposed to those of mainstream society. These two orientations--decent and street--socially organize the community, and their coexistence has important consequences for residents, particularly children growing up in the inner city."

<sup>264</sup> Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

although not nearly as popular as supporters, have made valid and urgent points about the problems with his scholarship.<sup>265</sup> In a review for *Human Geography*, James L. de Filippis suggested that the only effective use for Anderson's *Code of the Street* was to exemplify the failures of the underclass argument.<sup>266</sup> De Fillipis also had a problem with Anderson's demarcation between "decent" and "street" families, which he saw as pseudonyms for the "deserving poor" or "undeserving poor." He concluded the review by stating,

Instead of any new insights, we are left with: inner-city people are decent if they are like middle-class people, and middle-class people *are* decent because they *act* decently in public places. The book does, periodically, remember the structural and institutional causes of inner-city black poverty, and the final 10 pages call for increased funding for programmes like Head Start. But by that point the political right will have already gained what it wants from the book, and the left should have long since stopped reading.<sup>267</sup>

While it seems the left did not stop reading (evidenced by high praise from Cornel West to the *Washington Monthly*), more conservative reviewers have seconded de

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<sup>265</sup> Sociologists Jason Jimerson and Mathew Oware brought the concepts of race and gender performativity to bear in their ethnographic research used to assess Anderson's work. Jimerson and Oware contend that "the code of the street," is simply a narrative strategy used to perform expected norms of race and gender identity – in this case, black masculinity. The "doing" of race and gender is in the "telling" of the code – by Black men as well as sociologists like Elijah Anderson (who is also a Black man). Jimerson and Oware also assert that much of Anderson's data amounts to little more than gossip, "evaluative talk about a person who is not present." They quote directly from Anderson and the quotes that he employs to show that his notions and descriptions of "street families" come from people who are defining themselves as "decent" in opposition to others who they deem as "street." Anderson's claims about young mothers and white people are derived in the same way. Jason Jimerson and Matthew Oware, "Black Men Talking: Telling the Code of the Street," *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta Hilton Hotel, Atlanta, GA*, (Aug 16, 2003. [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p107739\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p107739_index.html)), 5.

<sup>266</sup> De Filippis summarizes the underclass argument as follows: "there is a class of poor inner-city blacks who are culturally, socially, and economically isolated, and different ('deviant'), from mainstream American society. Although the underclass argument sometimes contains structural explanations for the persistence of poverty, more often than not, work done in this school focuses on the behavioural [sic] patterns of the poor." James L. de Filippis, "Book Review: Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City," *Progress in Human Geography* 24 no. 4 (2000), 670 – 671.

<sup>267</sup> James L. de Filippis, "Book Review: Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City," *Progress in Human Geography* 24 no. 4 (2000), 671.

Fillipis' contention that although Anderson calls for increased jobs as a primary solution to the problems of poverty and violence described in his book, "this policy prescription does not comport with Anderson's description of the inner-city."<sup>268</sup>

Although Anderson's descriptions do not directly support progressive institutional reform, they lend a great deal of credence to HOPE VI and similarly harmful policies. Those familiar with Anderson's *Code of the Street* might see an attempt to separate the "decent" families from the "street" no matter how dubious the idea.<sup>269</sup> Someone else might see a strategy to eliminate the "the code of the street," and thus the professed link between structural conditions and individual acts of violence. These arguments and their connections are not new. Whatever the conclusions that others may reach, when I consider the urban underclass school of scholarship alongside its various policy impacts, I see the existence of a "criminalization complex" – a network of academic scholars, journalists, and government officials who not only contribute to the criminalization of Black youth in working, class communities but also benefit from the criminalizing portraits and policies that they create, whether intentionally or unintentionally, benevolently or malevolently.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Kevin R. Kosar. "The Underclass Up Close: A Review of The Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City." *The Wagner Review*, Spring 2000, 141 – 142. <http://www.kevinrkosar.com/anderson-review.pdf>

<sup>269</sup> . Low-income families who seek to move back into newly rebuilt developments must pass credit and criminal background checks. At one point, HUD also mandated membership in specific community and social services programs in order for former residents to gain access to newly rebuilt developments. According to housing advocate Winton Pitcoff, "some see the programs as tailored to allow entrance to only those families most likely to succeed and who already have some resources." Winton Pitcoff, "New Hope for Public Housing?" Shelterforce Online. Issue #104, March/April 1999. Montclair, NJ: National Housing Institute. <http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/104/pitcoff.html>.

<sup>270</sup> Historian and cultural critic Robin D.G. Kelley has also written of this connection, noting, "Today sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and economists compete for huge grants from Ford, Rockefeller, Sage, and other foundations to measure everything measurable in order to get a handle on the newest internal threat to civilization. With the discovery of the so-called underclass, terms like

I think about the Justice Department's recent affirmation of Elijah Anderson's scholarship – deeply saddened – then reflect on what I have learned through activism and organizing with young people – inspired and cautious. How will my words be used? What are my blind spots? What biases are reflected in my writing? And what violence might my words and theories render when I send them unescorted into the world – now or twenty years from now? Elijah Anderson saw the range of structural problems that Black youth faced in his analysis of violence among Black youth, the need for progressive policies such as increased employment, and the need to include the voices of young people and their families. But, this was not enough. Even if Anderson's work was not premised on classist assumptions, it would still not be enough to render visible what he failed to see.<sup>271</sup> Young people have advanced concealed and counter- stories in hip hop that challenge his and other popular scholarly perspectives on interpersonal violence. These narratives reveal the presence and impact of emotional trauma, in addition to harsh political economic conditions and society's abandonment of youth. They also call for community assistance, emotional healing, political resistance, and social change as strategies and solutions. I turn to the title track from Tupac's 1995 album, *Me Against the World*, to present a useful illustration.<sup>272</sup>

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*nihilistic, dysfunctional, and pathological* have become the most common adjectives to describe contemporary black urban culture." Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Dysfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (New York: Beacon Press, 1998), 16.

<sup>271</sup> In a review of *Code of the Streets*, geographer James L. De Fillippis points out many of Anderson's classist assumptions including Anderson's assumption that people who are middle class or have "middle class values" are respectable, law-abiding people. James L. de Filippis, "Book Review: Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City," *Progress in Human Geography* 24 no. 4 (2000), 670 – 671.

<sup>272</sup> 2Pac (Tupac), *Me Against the World*, Jive Records, 1995.

Tupac Shakur was arguably one of the most radically honest hip hop artists from the 1990s. His album, *Me Against the World* is considered to be the most personal and introspective of all his recordings. Speaking of the album, Tupac is quoted as saying,

It was like a blues record. It was down-home. It was all my fears, all the things I just couldn't sleep about. Everybody thought I was living so well and doing so good that I wanted to explain it. And it took a whole album to get it all out. I get to tell my innermost, darkest secrets. I tell my own personal problems.<sup>273</sup>

Tupac recorded the album at the age of 23 during a tumultuous 3-month period that began with a conviction for sexual assault.<sup>274</sup> Tupac was also shot in a robbery attempt the day before the court hearing. *Me Against the World* was released in

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<sup>273</sup> Tupac Shakur, Jacob Joye, Afeni Shakur, Karolyn Ali, and Walter Einkenkel. *Tupac: Resurrection 1971 – 1996* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 166.

<sup>274</sup> Tupac was convicted of two counts of sexual abuse and sentenced to one and a half to four and a half years in prison. *Vibe Magazine* published an account of what occurred that was written by the young woman, age 19, who was assaulted. According to her account, she met Tupac at a club and they had consensual sex later that night. A few nights later, she paged Tupac and his road manager called her back and directed her to take a taxi to their hotel, which she did. Upon arriving at the hotel, she went to a living room in a suite where she found Tupac along with two of his close associates, Trevor and Nigel. Soon after, Tupac and the young woman went to a bedroom in the same suite and began to massage one another. Shortly after, just as they began to kiss, people entered the room. She protested and said, I don't want to do this [with other people], I just came to see you. As she began to get off of the bed, Tupac slammed her head down. Tupac and Nigel then held her head down while Trevor forced her to perform oral sex on him. They also ripped her clothes and she began to black out. When she was finally able to leave the room, she sat down by the elevators and began to cry. The men brought her back into the suite, where Tupac was sitting on the sofa. She began to cry and shout at him, "How could you do this to me? I came here to see you. I can't believe you did this to me." Tupac replied, "I don't have time for this shit. Get this bitch out of here." The young woman ends her written account by saying, "I admit I didn't make the wisest decisions, but I did not deserve to be gang-raped." Name withheld, *Vibe Magazine*, June-July 1995, 21. In an account by Tupac published in an earlier edition of *Vibe Magazine* (but after his conviction and time in prison), Tupac said that three other men entered the bedroom about 30 minutes after he and the young woman were together. The men came over and began touching the woman on her butt, incited by Nigel, who told the others to pull the woman's panties down. Tupac said that he responded by getting up and leaving. Tupac also said that although he did not participate in her rape, he was guilty of not intervening, saying: "even though I'm innocent of the charge they gave me, I'm not innocent in terms of the way I was acting...I'm just as guilty for not doing nothing as I am for doing things...I know I feel ashamed--because I wanted to be accepted and because I didn't want no harm done to me, I didn't say nothing." *Vibe Magazine*, Quincy Jones, *Tupac Amaru Shakur, 1971 – 1996* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998,) 43. Thus, the central difference between the stories by Tupac and the young woman survivor is whether Tupac actively or passively participated in her rape, not whether it took place at all.

March 1995 while Tupac was serving a one and a half year prison sentence. It quickly soared to the top of the Billboard charts, and continues to claim status as one of the best hip hop albums ever. On *Me Against the World*, Tupac rhymes about a wide range of topics including his relationship with his mother (Dear Mama), suicidal thoughts (“Lord Knows”), lust for women (“Temptations”), and dating violence (“Can U Get Away”).

The title track, “Me Against the World,” interrogates multiple factors that contribute to peer violence among youth.<sup>275</sup> (In this case, I am using the term peer violence to refer to violence between people of the same generation and gender, rather than intimate forms of interpersonal violence such as sexual assault.) “Me Against the World” is a collaboration between Tupac and Dramacydal, a group Tupac mentored that later changed their name to the Outlawz. Tupac raps the first and third verses; Dramacydal raps the second verse in two parts, one member on the first part and another member on the second. The chorus alternates between the plaintive singing of a young woman and the rhythmic cadence of Tupac’s words:

Me against the world  
It’s just me against the world  
I got nothin’ to lose  
It’s just me against the world<sup>276</sup>

Unlike the traditional narrative forms contained in “The Message,” “I Cram to Understand U,” and Brenda’s Got a Baby,” “Me Against the World” is more like a personal essay that provides clear and cogent arguments that need little interpretation.

Tupac begins the first verse by asking, “Can you picture my prophecy?” He then describes “stress in the city,” – from cops, bullets, and dead bodies, and asks if

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<sup>275</sup> 2Pac (Tupac), *Me Against the World*, Jive Records, 1995.

<sup>276</sup> 2Pac (Tupac), “Me Against the World,” *Me Against the World*, Jive Records, 1995.

children involved in killing will “last or be blasted?”<sup>277</sup> In the next several lines, Tupac connects stress, anger and violence and calls out society’s hypocrisy toward youth:

More bodies being buried -- I'm losing my homies in a hurry  
They're relocating to the cemetery  
Got me worried, stressin, my vision's blurred  
The question is will I live? No one in the world loves me  
I'm headed for danger, don't trust strangers  
Put one in the chamber whenever I'm feelin this anger  
Don't wanna make excuses cause this is how it is  
What's the use? Unless we're shootin' no one notices the youth  
It's just me against the world baby<sup>278</sup>

Here, Tupac talks about how stress can lead to anger and how anger can lead to violence, or the desire to enact violence. This narrative debunks “the code of the street,” theory that posits the adoption of a deviant oppositional culture as the connection between stress and violence. Tupac also asserts that society has turned its back on youth, which challenges the stock story of self-isolation.<sup>279</sup>

In the second verse, the members of Dramacydal address how drug sales contribute to peer violence among youth, while questioning the availability of other options. One member begins his rap with the question, “Can somebody help me? I’m out here all by myself” and ends by asking, “Is there another route for a crooked outlaw / veteran, a villain, a young thug, who one day shall fall.” Another member of Dramacydal declares a similar conundrum:

Everyday there's mo' death, and plus I'm dough-less  
I'm seein mo' reasons for me to proceed with thievin  
Scheme on the scheming and leave they peeps grieving

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> William Julius Wilson asserted that poor, Black communities isolated themselves from mainstream society. . William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Cause ain't no bucks to stack up, my nuts is backed up  
I'm bout to act up, go load the Mac up, now watch me klacka  
Tried makin fat cuts, but yo it ain't workin  
And Evil's lurking, I can see him smirking  
when I gets to pervin, so what?  
Go put some work in, and make my mail, makin sales  
Risking 25 with a 'L', but oh well<sup>280</sup>

These verses are social and political critique. They call out the absence of help for young people who are trying to survive and the absence of viable economic options for young people in poor, urban communities. They also provide a collective explanation of why some youth have turned to the drug economy despite its violence.

For the last verse, the beat transitions to a slower syncopated rhythm accented by the sound of fingers snapping. Tupac also slows down his words as if to mark this verse as the most emphatic and the conclusion to the collective “essay.”

With all this extra stressin'  
The question I wonder is after death, after my last breath  
When will I finally get to rest? Through this suppression  
They punish the people that's askin' questions  
And those that possess steal from the ones without possessions  
The message I stress: to make it stop study your lessons  
Don't settle for less - even the genius asks questions  
Be grateful for blessings  
Don't ever change, keep your essence  
The power is in the people and politics we address<sup>281</sup>

Tupac emphasizes political education and collective resistance as avenues for challenging and transforming the conditions of urban, working-class communities. In subsequent lines, he also calls out the hypocrisy of politicians who are “in a position of making a difference” but fail to listen to young people and members of their communities. His outro also provides words of encouragement to young people:

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<sup>280</sup> 2Pac (Tupac), “Me Against the World,” *Me Against the World*, Jive Records, 1995.

<sup>281</sup> 2Pac (Tupac), “Me Against the World,” *Me Against the World*, Jive Records, 1995.



I know it seems hard sometimes but remember one thing. Through every dark night, there's a bright day after that. So no matter how hard it gets, stick your chest out, keep your head up and handle it.<sup>282</sup>

In these ways, “Me Against the World,” song emphasizes oppression and desperation alongside resilience and resistance.<sup>283</sup>

In “Me Against the World,” Tupac also briefly suggests how cultural norms and expectations can negatively impact one’s behavior and attitude. In the final lines of the last verse, Tupac declares, “If I'm insane, it's the fame made a brother change / It wasn't nothin like the game / It's just me against the world.” By the first two sentences in these lines, I believe that Tupac is saying that his notoriety as a rap star is partly to blame for participation in “insane,” acts, or harmful and destructive activities and that he found that the norms and expectations for prominent “gangsta rappers” was quite different from the norms and expectations of those involved in the real “game” on the street. Because the songs on *Me Against the World* were produced so closely after Tupac’s conviction for sexual abuse, I believe that this “insanity” may also refer to Tupac’s participation in the rape of a young Black woman. My interpretation of these last lines of “Me Against the World” is also supported by interviews in which Tupac has made these points. For example, in an interview with Kevin Powell published in *Vibe Magazine* following the release of *Me Against the World*, Tupac said,

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<sup>282</sup> 2Pac (Tupac), “Me Against the World,” *Me Against the World*, Jive Records, 1995.

<sup>283</sup> My understanding of resilience and resistance is indebted to the work of the Young Women’s Empowerment Project (YWEP) and their research on the resilience and resistance of young women in the sex trade and street economy. YWEP defined resilience as “ways to bounce back and heal, whether they be conventional or unconventional,” and resistance as “the means and methods used to ‘fight back.’” They also found that “resilience is a stepping stone to resistance.” Young Women’s Empowerment Project, “Girls Do What They Have to Do to Survive: Illuminating Methods Used by Girls in the Sex Trade and Street Economy to Fight Back and Heal. A Participatory Action Research Study of Resilience and Resistance.” (Chicago: Young Women’s Empowerment Project, 2009). <http://www.youarepriceless.org/node/190>

“When you do rap albums, you got to train yourself. You got to constantly be in character. You used to see rappers talking all that hard shit, and then you see them in suits and shit at the American Music Awards. I didn’t want to be that type of nigga. I wanted to keep it real, and that’s what I thought I was doing. But...let somebody else represent it. I represented it too much. I *was* thug life.”<sup>284</sup>

Here, Tupac is identifying the tensions between reality and representations of “the real,” between what he wants to be and what others expect him to be. Tupac has also remarked that his desire to be accepted and his own fear led to his decision to allow a group of his close associates to rape a young woman with whom he was sexually involved.<sup>285</sup> “Me Against the World” thus not only suggests a range of factors that contribute to participation in peer violence including the lack of economic opportunity and emotional pain. It also suggests additional factors that contribute to participation in other kinds of violence such as peer pressure and confining social constructs.

“Me Against the World,” connects emotional, political, economic and social dimensions as contributors to violence. It narrates how political economic conditions such as the absence of legal economic opportunities for youth as well as emotional conditions such as stress, anger, pain, can contribute to peer violence. It also suggests additional factors such as peer pressure and norms and expectations that operate across society, as well as within specific peer groups. “Me Against the World” also identifies the need for help, healing and resistance. In other songs on the album, *Me Against the World*, Tupac discusses trauma and the need for emotional healing in

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<sup>284</sup> *Vibe Magazine*, Quincy Jones, *Tupac Amaru Shakur, 1971 – 1996* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 43.

<sup>285</sup> While the young woman says that he participated in the assault and forced her to commit oral sex on one of his friends, Tupac said he got up and left, rather than intervene in what was going on, partially because, “I wanted to be accepted.” *Vibe Magazine*, Quincy Jones, *Tupac Amaru Shakur, 1971 – 1996* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 43.

greater depth. For example, on *Lord Knows*, Tupac raps, “I smoke a blunt to take the pain out / and if I wasn’t high, I’d probably try to blow my brains out.”<sup>286</sup> These words are the first line in the song and serve as a repeating chorus. Mainstream social scientific explanations of peer violence among working-class African-American youth have tended to stress the behaviors or moral conditions of youth and/or the structural conditions of urban communities, while ignoring the emotional and social dimensions of young people’s lives. This analysis leaves us with solutions that sidestep the need for spiritual and emotional healing and social change alongside political and economic transformation. Mainstream accounts also tend to ignore the political agency and intellectual abilities of young people. Hip hop artists’ concealed stories declare and prove that young people critically interrogate their conditions, encourage each other, and struggle for personal and social transformation.

### *Conclusion*

Cultural critics, youth organizers, and scholars have long recognized how hip hop music builds the capacity of young people to use their power for social change. Hip hop music is a source of political education, facilitates the formation of political identity, and serves as the soundtrack and cultural glue of contemporary youth justice movements.<sup>287</sup> Hip hop music has also helped to foster political consciousness and activism among youth.<sup>288</sup> The analysis that I provide in this chapter helps to

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<sup>286</sup> 2Pac (Tupac), “Lord Knows,” *Me Against the World*, Jive Records, 1995.

<sup>287</sup> Victor Rios, “From Knucklehead to Revolutionary”: Urban Youth Culture and Social Transformation. *Journal of Urban Youth Culture* (2005). <http://juyc.org/pdf/riosvictor.pdf>; Soo Ah Kwon, *Second-Generation Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Social Change Practices* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1995); Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006).

<sup>288</sup> Andreanna Clay, “ ‘All I Need Is One Mic’: Mobilizing Youth for Social Change in the Post-Civil Rights Era,” *Social Justice* 33, 2 (2006): 106; Jeff Chang, *Constant Elevation: The Rise of Bay Area*

understand additional dimensions of hip hop music's contributions to social change by explaining how young hip hop artists have promoted critical understandings of violence. While challenging criminalizing stock stories, hip hop music contains concealed stories that provide a framework for critical discourse about youth and violence. They teach us the need for discourses that center political economic transformation, provide compassionate representations, and call for spiritual and emotional healing as well as political, economic, and social change.

I used the concept of epistemic violence to illuminate the harms and injuries caused by the production and promotion of hegemonic knowledge. Alongside recognition of epistemic violence, I suggest that we can also talk about epistemic resistance – how the production and promotion of knowledge helps to liberate and build power. In a short paper titled, “Theories for Power for Activists,” published by the Grassroots Policy Project, Project directors Sandra Hinson and Richard Healey describe three faces of power, or three ways in which people can use power to create change.<sup>289</sup> The first face of power refers to the ability to directly impact political and economic decisions such as laws and policies. Tactics used to build and wield this kind of power range from legal action and lobbying to walk-outs and accountability sessions. The second face of power refers to the development of infrastructure to

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Hip-Hop Activism, (Self-published Monograph), 2004. Shawn Ginwright, “Toward A Politics of Relevance: Race, Resistance, and African American Youth Activism,” *Youth Activism: A Web Forum Organized by the Social Science Research Council*, Social Science Research Council, June 2006. <http://ya.ssrc.org/african/Ginwright/>; Nilda Flores-González, Matthew Rodríguez, and Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz, “From Hip-Hop to Humanization: Batey Urbano as a Space for Latino Youth Culture and Community Action,” in *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth*, ed. Shawn Ginwright, Pedro Noguera, and Julio Cammarota. (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>289</sup> Sandra Hinson and Richard Healey, “Theories of Power for Activists,” Grassroots Policy Project, January 2007. Excerpted from Sandra Hinson and Richard Healey, “Movement Strategy for Organizers” in *Rhyming Hope and History: Activists, Academics and Social Movement Scholarship*, ed. David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Charlotte Ryan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.)

shape political agendas. Finally, as Hinson and Healey explain, “The third face of power is about the common sense notion that people derive from much of their conceptual framework from society at large. We define the third face as using cultural beliefs, norms, traditions, histories, and practices to shape political meaning, the ways that people understand the world around the, their roles in the world and what they see as possible.”<sup>290</sup> Using this definition and framework of power, we can better understand epistemic resistance as a strategy for building power, and the use of hip hop music as a tactic for building this kind power through influencing ideological perspectives. Dominant discourses of violence have consistently been used to demonize and scapegoat various groups in order to facilitate and justify their containment and confinement. Youth recognized that the prevailing discourses must be reshaped and reframed as a central aspect of resistance to the punitive and criminalizing ideologies that sustain this process. Youth used hip hop as a form of cultural activism to build ideological power.

Most projects that employ a Black feminist cultural criticism of hip hop music have addressed misogyny, sexual exploitation and harmful constructs of Black masculinity. These projects include *How Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip Hop Feminist* by Joan Morgan, *Pimps Up, Hoes Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women* by T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and the film *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* by Byron Hurt.<sup>291</sup> These projects call out the epistemic

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<sup>290</sup> Sandra Hinson and Richard Healey, “Theories of Power for Activists,” Grassroots Policy Project, January 2007. Excerpted from Sandra Hinson and Richard Healey, “Movement Strategy for Organizers” in *Rhyming Hope and History: Activists, Academics and Social Movement Scholarship*, ed. David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Charlotte Ryan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.)

<sup>291</sup> Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home To Roost: My Life as a Hip Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999); T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Hoes Down: Hip Hop’s*

violence of hip hop artists and help listeners to make sense of and critique the harmful femiphobic and homophobic messages that are often embedded in hip hop music. My project is radically different from these significant interventions in that I have focused on mining the elements that we need to keep – elements that I believe can help us to better talk about and thus challenge violence against youth. The narratives that I have discussed perform this feat well in relation to forms of violence that disproportionately impact young men such as police harassment, incarceration and public shootings as well as violence that impacts young men and women as a group such as political economic abandonment and neoliberal economic policies.

However, hip hop's concealed stories of violence are not very helpful in teaching us how to better talk about and challenge individual and institutional violence that disproportionately impact young women, such as rape, child sexual abuse, and dating violence.<sup>292</sup> They are also largely silent about the existence and impacts of police abuse, criminalization, and incarceration against young women. Youth who experience individual and institutionalized homophobic violence are also largely left out of these narratives. Educators and organizers who use hip hop music

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*Hold on Young Women* (New York: NYU Press, 2007) Byron Hurt, producer, writer, and director. *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*. Northampton, Mass.: Media Education Foundation, 2006.

<sup>292</sup> I use the long phrase, “violence that disproportionately impacts young women” rather than the term, gendered violence because I acknowledge that forms of violence that disproportionately impact young men are also gendered. In fact, I believe that talking about gender violence, or gendered violence, more broadly will help young men to develop a stronger commitment to challenging all forms of gendered violence – those that especially impact them as well as those that especially impact young women. Youths’ (and adults) lack of a critical analysis on male violence against young women was painfully evident in public forums in which youth responded to hip hop artist Chris Brown’s physical abuse of pop star Rihanna, who he was dating at the time. Most responders blamed Rihanna for the abuse. Those that did not tended to cite incarceration as a solution to dating violence. In order to move past these limited views, we need to develop a stronger public critique against carceral and intimate forms of violence within the same spaces. By carceral forms of violence, I mean violence that is connected to processes of incarceration such as criminalization, hyper-policing, and incarceration, as well as violence that occurs within prisons, which includes intimate forms of violence. By intimate violence, I mean violence among intimate partners such as dating violence as well as violence that violates people in sexual, or intimate, ways such as rape.

as a pedagogical and consciousness-raising tool must be aware of and address these gaps so that youth can develop a more holistic critical analysis of violence against youth and build ideological power to challenge violence in all its forms. Some ways that educators and organizers might do this is by sharing the kinds of concealed stories in hip hop that I have discussed in this chapter, then introducing R&B and pop songs that include concealed narratives of sexual abuse and dating violence and “homo hop,” a subgenre hip hop produced by queer youth. They should facilitate discussions about the music, and encourage youth to make connections and intersections across narratives and genres. Educators might also supplement narratives within the songs with accounts of artists’ sober reflections on their own participation in intimate and sexualized forms of violence such as Tupac’s account discussed in this chapter. Lastly, organizers and educators should encourage youth to develop narratives that reflect their own experiences of violence, healing and resistance. They can use the music that I have just described to help create a safe space for youth to share their stories, develop a broad vision of youth safety and justice, and plan individual and collective actions to work toward their vision.

In this chapter, I discussed how Black youth have used hip hop music to advance a critical analysis of violence in a climate of criminalization. Their concealed stories delivered through incisive rap advance critical understandings of the conditions that impact their lives. Their counter-stories also challenge the criminalizing stock stories told in the formative years of the prison-industrial complex. In the process, young people established important theoretical and discursive frameworks for challenging the criminalization and incarceration of youth

and the political economic abandonment of their communities. In the next chapter, I focus on a grassroots campaign against punitive policy proposals that took place in Washington, D.C. The chapter illustrates how transforming the frameworks used to understand and communicate about youth and violence were crucial components of a successful youth organizing campaign.



## Chapter 4 – “Lifting Up a New Vision of Youth Justice in the District”

Repeatedly, the Youth Media Council has found that when outlets cover youth or youth policy their content criminalizes and silences youth — particularly youth of color — and creates a climate supportive of ineffective, unfair, unbalanced, and dangerous public policies.

- Youth Media Council<sup>293</sup>

Our efforts to lift up a new vision of youth justice in the District did not begin with fighting this punitive legislation, nor will it end here.

- Amoretta Morris, Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition<sup>294</sup>

### *Introduction*

From 2003 to 2004, the Justice 4 D.C.! Youth Coalition led the “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!” campaign, a grassroots organizing initiative “to defeat misguided, reactionary legislation” presented as solutions to “youth violence.”<sup>295</sup> During the campaign, youth and adults in the District of Columbia organized around the slogan, “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!,” while advocating for alternatives to policies introduced by the Mayor and several members of the D.C. City Council. Even before the introduction of legislation that the Coalition rallied against, youth members of the Coalition were talking about the changing conditions in the city and began naming what they were facing as a “war on youth.”<sup>296</sup> The “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!” campaign halted a package of punitive policies, led to the closure of an infamous juvenile detention facility, and substantially increased community-based alternatives

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<sup>293</sup> Youth Media Council, “Is KMEL The People’s Station? A Community Assessment of 106.1 KMEL,” Oakland, California: Youth Media Council, 2002.

<sup>294</sup> Retta Morris, E-mail communication with Justice 4 D.C. Youth Listserv members. November 2004.

<sup>295</sup> Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition. “ ‘Stop the War on D.C. Youth!’ Campaign.” Unpublished document in author’s possession. n.d.

<sup>296</sup> Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition. “ ‘Stop the War on D.C. Youth!’ Campaign.” Unpublished document in author’s possession. n.d.; Shani O’Neal. “Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign, 2003 – 2004.” September 2008. Unpublished document in author’s possession.

to incarceration for youth in Washington, D.C. It also influenced the terms of public debate on youth, incarceration, and violence. I consider the campaign a success for these reasons. In this chapter, I present the story of the Justice 4 D.C. Youth Coalition's successful "Stop the War on D.C.! Youth" campaign as a story of resistance, illuminating how young people worked alongside adults to transform public opinion and shift public policy.<sup>297</sup> I argue that the success of the campaign was linked to youths' efforts to advance an alternative discourse on youth and violence. I also discuss how youth organizers in other cities have used research to challenge and reshape discourses and ideologies on youth, crime, and violence.

Violence is often invoked as the rationale to pass "get tough-on-crime" policies, expand the reach of law enforcement, and reinforce the "need" for policing and prisons.<sup>298</sup> This is especially the case when it comes to youth policy. Citing "youth violence," nearly every state in the U.S. as well as the District of Columbia changed their juvenile justice laws in the 1990s, institutionalizing zero-tolerance approaches, gang enhancements, mandatory minimum sentences, and youths'

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<sup>297</sup> In order to tell this story of resistance, I consulted campaign materials and organizational documents. I also heavily relied on a document prepared by current JDCY director Shani O'Neal, in which she began drafting a narrative of the campaign. The document also includes notes that O'Neal took during an interview she conducted with Amoretta Morris in 2008. Morris was the director of JDCY from 2002 to 2005, and coordinated the entire "Stop the War on D.C. Youth!" campaign. Lastly, the story I tell in this chapter is informed by my personal experiences as a member of the Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition and an active participant in the "Stop the War on D.C. Youth!" campaign. I joined the Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition in the summer of 2003. Since that time, I have held multiple roles in the organization including general member, chair of the outreach committee, steering committee member, and advisory committee member. When JDCY was without an executive director for approximately one year, I worked with other steering committee members to run the organization. After a new director was hired in 2006, the steering committee transitioned to an advisory committee. As of this writing, JDCY is no longer a coalition and is now known as Justice for D.C. Youth.

<sup>298</sup> Cynthia Chandler and Carol Kingery, "Speaking Out Against State Violence: Activist HIV-Positive Women Prisoners Redefine Social Justice," in *Policing the National Body: Race, Gender, and Criminalization*, ed. Jael Silliman and Annanya Battacharjee. (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2002).

treatment as adults within the criminal legal system.<sup>299</sup> This shift in policy has increased the police presence in schools and neighborhoods, created new infractions for which youth can be arrested and incarcerated, transferred juveniles as young as 12 years old to adult courts and prisons, and facilitated the movement of thousands of young people of color to detention centers and prisons.<sup>300</sup> As a result, the rate of juvenile incarceration increased 43% between 1990 and 2000.<sup>301</sup> African-American, Native, and Latina/o youth have been most impacted, as a result of racial discrimination built into the laws, racially discriminatory implementation of the laws, and a landscape of criminalization facing young people of color.<sup>302</sup>

Young people and their adult allies have worked to name this barrage of attacks and organize against them. Their efforts led to the development of the “War on Youth” as a political discourse. The term, “War on Youth,” refers to the proliferation of policies and practices that scapegoat and punish young people of

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<sup>299</sup> Barry Feld, “Juvenile and Criminal Justice Systems’ Responses to Youth Violence,” *Crime and Justice* 24, no. 189 (1998); In 2000, *Colorlines Magazine* published an article about this policy shift, noting sweep laws as an additional member of this family of repressive anti-youth policies: “In the last decade, sweep laws -- laws against loitering, anti-truancy ordinances, anti-cruising laws, and curfews -- have proliferated across the country...The most famous sweep law was passed in Chicago in 1992 -- a gang anti-loitering ordinance that made it illegal to stand on the street with any person whom a cop “reasonably believes” to be in a gang. Under the ordinance, 43,000 young Chicagoans were arrested in just two years, the vast majority of them youth of color. Only a tiny fraction of them were actually charged with a crime...The sweep mentality now pervades even school safety policy. In Oakland, CA, the school board recently voted to spend \$1.13 million a year to maintain its own 24-hour-a-day police force. The only board member to vote against the plan said, “When we have to take money from our core educational function, the children suffer.” Ryan Pintado-Vertner and Jeff Chang, “The War on Youth,” *Colorlines Magazine*, Winter 1999, <http://www.colorlines.com/article.php?ID=332>.

<sup>300</sup> Barry Feld, “Juvenile and Criminal Justice Systems’ Responses to Youth Violence,” *Crime and Justice* 24, no. 189 (1998).

<sup>301</sup> John Muncie, “The ‘Punitive Turn’ in Juvenile Justice: Cultures of Control and Rights Compliance in Western Europe and the USA” (*Youth Justice* Vol. 8, No. 2., 2008), 107-121.

<sup>302</sup> Many of these policies have also substantially increased rates of arrest and incarceration for Asian youth, particularly Southeast Asian youth. Ethnic studies scholar Soo Ak Kwon has examined this trend alongside the participation of Asian youth in anti-prison youth organizing. Soo Ah Kwon. “Youth of Color Organizing for Juvenile Justice.” (in *Beyond Resistance: Youth Activism and Community Change. New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America’s Youth*, ed. by Shawn Ginwright, Pedro Noguera, and Julio Cammarota, New York: Routledge, 2006.), 215-228.

color, while depriving them of the resources they need for survival and development.<sup>303</sup> Like other terms and discourses rooted in processes of collective analysis and action, the “war on youth” thesis is not the idea of a single individual, nor can it be traced to a single source. Rather, it has developed and spread through processes of local and national organizing in which youth and adults came together to name the conditions that they were fighting against. There is considerable research on various facets of the War on Youth such as the school-to-prison pipeline, the criminalization of young people of color, and the withdrawal of government supports and services from poor, urban communities.<sup>304</sup> However, there are few studies on how young people have responded to local manifestations of the War on Youth through grassroots organizing and even less that discuss youth activism and organizing in locations outside of California.<sup>305</sup> There is also no scholarship on how the “War on Youth” discourse emerged at the local level. This chapter contributes significant insight in these areas.<sup>306</sup>

In this chapter, I draw on Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory principally through centering the voices, analysis and political agency of youth, and by sharing resistance stories. According to a conceptual framework of storytelling

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<sup>303</sup> Ryan Pintado-Vertner and Jeff Chang, “The War on Youth,” *Colorlines Magazine*, Winter 1999, <http://www.colorlines.com/article.php?ID=332>.

<sup>304</sup> Some examples of this scholarship are: Arnette Ferguson, *Bad Boys*; Victor Rios,

<sup>305</sup> Examples of existing scholarship in this area include Soo Ah Kwon, *Second Generation Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Social Change Practices*. (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2005); Soo Ah Kwon, “Youth of Color Organizing for Juvenile Justice,” in *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America’s Youth*, ed. Shawn Ginwright, Pedro Noguera, and Julio Cammarota (New York: Routledge, 2006); Andreana Clay, *What Are We Fighting For? Youth, Activism and Social Change at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2004); Victor Merlan Rios, *Adult Time for Juvenile Crime: The Social Effects of Criminalization on Black and Chicano Male Youth*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2005).

<sup>306</sup> JDCY launched a second Stop the War on D.C. Youth! (SWOY) campaign in 2006. This chapter focuses specifically on the 2003 to 2004 SWOY campaign.

practices rooted in Critical Race Theory, resistance stories are historical or contemporary accounts that tell how people have challenged oppressive systems and practices as well as the stock stories that underlie these systems and practices. Resistance stories also show how people have struggled for fairness and justice.<sup>307</sup> In the first part of this chapter, I share resistance stories that tell how youth have used research to challenge stock stories of youth, crime and violence in the mainstream media. These resistance stories provide an understanding of the criminalization of youth since the 1990s from the perspective of young people who have researched, documented and analyzed this criminalization in relation to local and national media.

The central resistance story told in this chapter is the story of the Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition's "Stop the War on D.C. Youth!" campaign. This story tells how youth, working in conjunction with adults, broadened narrow understandings of violence against youth while challenging policies that they deemed unjust and harmful responses to incidents of crime and violence committed by young people. All of the stories in this chapter share a focus on youths' involvement in community organizing against criminalization and violence. While this focus is more pronounced in the story of the "Stop the War on D.C. Youth! campaign, the stories of resistance in the next section illuminate youths' production of research as a common component and foundation of youth-led organizing campaigns.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Lee Anne Bell et al, "The Storytelling Project Curriculum: Learning about Race and Racism through Storytelling and the Arts," (New York: Barnard College, 2008), 8 – 9.

<sup>308</sup> Youth organizing is a systemic process in which young people come together to collectively analyze problems that affect them and their communities and create, or win, sustainable solutions that transform power relations. Young people build skills, knowledge, leadership and movements while participating in membership-based organizations, campaigns and projects over a long-term period. Youths' personal and political development is also considered as important as social change. In youth organizing groups, young people hold authority and power to choose the agenda, design and implement campaigns and programs, and evaluate the impacts. Adults play various roles such as co-

My focus on youths' participatory action research in the first part of this chapter also allows me to feature youths' analysis of criminalization in their own words. Their analysis shows how they have identified criminalization as a form of epistemic violence against youth. My discussion of Justice 4 D.C. Youth!'s Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign also makes this point. However, my coverage of the latter case emphasizes youths' activities and provides much less of their analysis in their own words. My choice to avoid ethnography despite my own participation in the organizing campaign I write about is one reason for the absence of youths' voices. I also do not provide an extensive discussion, or quotes from, a participatory action research group study that youth organizers conducted on the topic of "youth violence" during the "Stop the War on D.C. Youth!" campaign. Still, all of the resistance stories within this chapter show youth how articulated their own stories and discourses of violence while contesting dominant frameworks, as well as their policy impacts.

### *Addressing Stock Stories of Youth and Crime in a National Newspaper*

Youth Force was a youth organizing group based in the South Bronx, whose membership primarily consisted of young people of color, ages 14 to 25, with direct experience in the criminal or juvenile justice systems. According to Kim McGillicuddy, one of the founders of the organization, "Youth Force was created by and for young people to school each other to the fact that we are not powerless, we should be seen and heard, and we have the ability and right to act for change. We are

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organizers, administrators, facilitators, educators and allies. Some youth organizing groups consist solely of youth members, while others are intergenerational. Some organizations also incorporate youth organizing alongside additional social change strategies such as traditional advocacy, coalition-building, and service delivery. "Funding Youth Organizing Strategies for Building Power and Youth Leadership" Funders' Briefing Held at Open Society Institute. New York, 1997.

committed to giving ourselves and other youth the skills and opportunities we need to participate in the running of our schools, the neighborhood, and city.”<sup>309</sup> Recognizing their power and ability to change their community and the systems impacting their lives, Youth Force members adopted the slogan, "Cause Until Youth Act, New York City Won't Change. 'Nuff Said." Their programs, projects and campaigns to foster youth leadership and social change integrated youth organizing and youth services.<sup>310</sup> For example, Youth Force offered political education to young people through the Youth Force Street University on a weekly basis, which included film screenings, progressive performances and reading group discussions. Youth Force members also provided peer counseling to youth in detention centers and on the street as well as legal assistance to teenagers who experienced problems with police in their schools. In addition, they established and operated an effective Youth Court Program that was utilized by over 1,000 New York City youth in a single two-year period.<sup>311</sup> Youth Force also waged a successful campaign to win support and funding from the New York City government to establish a center for community justice, which would expand and build the capacity of their effective youth court program. In 1998, Youth Force launched the South Bronx Community Justice Center, which provided legal education, a youth court, and other services for young people including job referrals

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<sup>309</sup> Barry Checkoway, Lisa Figueroa, Katie Richards-Schuster, "Democracy Multiplied in an Urban Neighborhood: Youth Force in the South Bronx," *Children, Youth and Environments* 13 no. 2 (2003).

<sup>310</sup> Barry Checkoway, Lisa Figueroa, Katie Richards-Schuster, "Democracy Multiplied in an Urban Neighborhood: Youth Force in the South Bronx," *Children, Youth and Environments* 13 no. 2 (2003)..

<sup>311</sup> In Youth Court, young people heard and decided the cases of their peers, sentencing offenders (referred from New York City's Department of Probation's Alternative to Court program) to legal education, community action projects, apology letters, jury duty service on Youth Court, or a stint of community service with Youth Force. Many of the youth sentenced to work with Youth Force remained with the organization after meeting their community service requirements. Mark Berkey-Gerard, "Community Service, For Real: In the South Bronx, Youth Organizers Commit to a Neighborhood Crying for a Second Chance." *Horizon: People and Possibilities* (Magazine), The Enterprise Foundation, October 2000.

and counseling. That same year, they also produced a report called "Jail Logic," in which they recommended effective practices that reduce incarceration and improve communities to the New York City Department of Juvenile Justice. In 2000, Youth Force teamed up We Interrupt This Message, a national media advocacy group to conduct research on the criminalization of young people in the newsprint media.<sup>312</sup> The report they authored, "In Between the Lines: How *The New York Times* Frames Youth," links the criminal and juvenile policies they were working against to the treatment of youth in the news media.

Nine youth members, ages 16 to 18, participated in researching and writing the report on *The New York Times*. The five youth who authored the report were students at Arturo Schomburg Satellite Academy, an alternative public high school in the South Bronx. Four additional Youth Force members, two of whom also attended Arturo Schomburg, provided additional research support. The team was also assisted by the adult staff of Youth Force and We Interrupt This Message. According to the youth researchers, their mission was to challenge media stereotypes of youth and change the way media portrays youth in society.<sup>313</sup> "The media (including television,

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<sup>312</sup> According to an article on Youth Force co-authored by one of its staff, "New York's South Bronx is among America's most economically-disinvested areas. Over several decades, manufacturing firms have closed and jobs have gone elsewhere. The area has the densest concentration of public housing in the nation, only a small fraction of the area's housing is owner-occupied, and this is often substandard. The area has high rates of infant mortality, crime, and violence, although these have declined in recent years." Barry Checkoway, Lisa Figueroa, Katie Richards-Schuster, "Democracy Multiplied in an Urban Neighborhood: Youth Force in the South Bronx," *Children, Youth and Environments* 13 no. 2 (2003).

<sup>313</sup> Youth Force was not only concerned about the criminalization of young people of color generally but the criminalization of young people in the South Bronx specifically. They have noted, for example how both journalists and social scientists have contributed to this criminalization. According to a journal article co-authored by a staff member of Youth Force, "South Bronx young people are portrayed by news media as criminals, drug takers, school dropouts, or other problems in society. ... Social scientists reinforce these views of the South Bronx with studies of poverty, racism, and other forces that cause worsening social conditions which result in youth pathologies that require intervention. In his books about the South Bronx, Jonathan Kozol (1996; 2000) describes children from



radio, the Internet, magazines, and newspapers) often depict youth of color as violent, drug-abusing, gang-banging miscreants,” wrote Hayden Mendoza, one of the authors.<sup>314</sup> “Our personal experiences along with the knowledge of the crucial role that media plays in how we are portrayed and subsequently treated drove us to take up this study. We want to change biased coverage of young people in the media, using our study of *The New York Times* as a stepping stone.”<sup>315</sup>

Youth Force members who worked on the *New York Times* research study were trained to conduct a content analysis of newspaper articles, which they proceeded to do on the coverage of youth and crime in *The New York Times*. Youth Force members worked on study over the course of a year. They examined three months of news articles from January through May 2000 that “covered a domestic crime involving youth as a perpetrator or victims, or discussed juvenile crime trends or policies.” They defined youth as a person 21 years or younger for the purposes of their report. In all, they analyzed 93 articles that fit the criteria they outlined. This analysis formed the basis for their findings and recommendations detailed in their report.

The 22-page report begins with statements on the link between public policies that treat youth like “criminals” and the criminalization of youth in the news media.

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broken families, terrible schools, and poor living conditions. Some of his subjects are resilient, but most of them are not, and his writings have a large readership. His images are paralleled by Robert Putnam (2000), who describes young people as withdrawn from participation and disengaged from democracy.” Barry Checkoway, Lisa Figueroa, Katie Richards-Schuster, “Democracy Multiplied in an Urban Neighborhood: Youth Force in the South Bronx,” *Children, Youth and Environments* 13 no. 2 (2003).

<sup>314</sup> Shaquesha Alequin et al., “In Between the Lines: How *The New York Times* Frames Youth,” New York: Youth Force and We Interrupt This Message, 2000.

<sup>315</sup> Shaquesha Alequin et al., “In Between the Lines: How *The New York Times* Frames Youth,” New York: Youth Force and We Interrupt This Message, 2000.

The first three sentences of the report appear in a brief section called, “What’s In the News:”

Despite the 33% drop in juvenile crime since 1993, two-thirds of the American public believe that juvenile crime is rising. What is responsible for this misconception? One powerful factor is the role of the news media

The section then hones in on specific policies – the transfer of school security to the New York Police Department in 1998, zero tolerance policies in New York and elsewhere that target youth of color, and laws easing the transfer of youth to adult courts in 47 states and the District of Columbia enacted between 1992 and 1997. The youth researchers also detailed specific policy impacts: Three out of four youth admitted to state prisons between 1985 and 1997 were youth of color, they shared. During this same period, the number of all youth admitted to state prisons doubled. Finally, they linked these policies and their impacts to the coverage of youth in the news, stating:

Among those who perceive a crime problem nationally, 82% say *their assessment is based on crime reports they’ve seen in the news. Only 17% say it’s based on their personal experience.* The connection between media-informed public opinion and public policy is a strong one, as policy-makers and voters work to initiate solutions to what they perceive to be social and political problems (emphasis in the original).<sup>316</sup>

The authors also pointed out that their findings of their research tell a national story because *The New York Times* has a reputation for affecting public policy at the national level.<sup>317</sup>

Youth Force’s study found *The New York Times*’ coverage of youth and crime inaccurate and prejudicial. *The Times* over-represented the rate of youth crime, over-

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<sup>316</sup> Shaquasha Alequin et al., “In Between the Lines: How *The New York Times* Frames Youth,” New York: Youth Force and We Interrupt This Message, 2000.

<sup>317</sup> Shaquasha Alequin et al., “In Between the Lines: How *The New York Times* Frames Youth,” New York: Youth Force and We Interrupt This Message, 2000.

represented the rate of school violence, rarely discussed contributing factors to crime such as poverty, and failed to provide important context such as the national drop in youth crime.<sup>318</sup> The youth organizers also uncovered a large bias toward white youth. Youth of color were typically portrayed negatively through pictures of them in handcuffs or shackles with little personal information other than criminal history. In contrast, photos of white youth were taken from family albums or school yearbooks and the content of articles noted their hobbies and interests. Two other major findings made by the Youth Force team about *The Times* coverage included one-sided stories (police were always quoted while the views of the involved youth or their advocates were rarely presented) and absent solutions (stories only focused on incarceration as a solution to youth crime, leaving other alternatives both unnamed and unexamined).

In addition to listing their findings, Youth Force researchers included a list of six recommendations and a list of eleven directives for *The New York Times* under the section title “What We Want.” They recommended that *Times* reporters provide the context of youth crime in stories, including trends such as the declining rate of youth crime and the large rate of adult crime perpetrated against youth that is under-reported in the paper. They also asked *Times* staff to stop spreading the myth that school violence is rising. A student has more of a chance of being struck by lightning than killed at school, they noted. *Times* reporters could mention this statistic in their coverage of youth violence, the researchers wrote. Based on these findings and recommendations, their eleven demands to *The New York Times* stated:

Meet with us to discuss our findings; Carry out the recommendations presented in this study; Ensure that youth of color are represented fairly and

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<sup>318</sup> Only 1 in 93 articles cited this drop. Shaquesha Alequin et al., “In Between the Lines: How *The New York Times* Frames Youth,” New York: Youth Force and We Interrupt This Message, 2000.

accurately; Hire Youth Editors; Publish Youth Reporters; Create a YOUTH desk for the 26% of the population in America that youth represent; Create a Positive News Section- cover youth that are doing good work as an everyday occurrence; Cover youth crime policies comprehensively and include where public representatives stand on these issues; Endorse an ongoing media accountability project in NYC; Provide funding to run our own youth newspaper – where we are the editors and the reporters; Publish an op-ed we write about this study”<sup>319</sup>

After the report’s publication, editors at *The New York Times* agreed to meet with the youth organizers about their research. But according to the youth participants at the meeting, the editors failed to take them seriously. The meeting took place in December 2001 at *The New York Times* offices. When the youth walked in, none of the *Times* editors shook their hands or introduced themselves.<sup>320</sup> “We were prepared to deal with "adults" who had tact and a business-like demeanor,” said 19-year-old Shaquesha Alequin. “But what we got was a very unorganized, unprofessional meeting. No handshakes, no introductions, no poise.”<sup>321</sup> For most of the hour-and-a-half meeting, the *Times* team took over, according to Youth Force members.<sup>322</sup> New York Times Metro editor Jonathan Landman’s first comment to the group was “At least we know you read *The New York Times*.”<sup>323</sup> Soon after, he put his feet up on his desk, reported Alequin. Landman also rebuffed the research, stating the paper has reported "endlessly" on the decline in crime and that he does not feel those three months accurately reflect *The Times'* overall coverage on youth and crime. “I don’t think it’s a serious study of how journalism is done,” said Landman. “It’s a

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<sup>319</sup> Shaquesha Alequin et al., “In Between the Lines: How *The New York Times* Frames Youth,” New York: Youth Force, We Interrupt This Message, 2000.

<sup>320</sup> Avi Mermelstein, “Teens V. Times.” *City Limits Monthly*. April 2001.

<sup>321</sup> Avi Mermelstein, “Teens V. Times.” *City Limits Monthly*. April 2001.

<sup>322</sup> Avi Mermelstein, “Teens V. Times.” *City Limits Monthly*. April 2001.

<sup>323</sup> Avi Mermelstein, “Teens V. Times.” *City Limits Monthly*. April 2001.

misunderstanding of what journalism is.”<sup>324</sup> Assignment editor Tony Marcano likened the project to grading a student’s overall success based on a single semester of C work. Despite their rhetoric, a *New York Times* article published the day after the meeting mentioned the overall decline in youth crime. The editors have denied that this is a result of Youth Force’s research and follow-up, but Youth Force members were confident that they made a difference, regardless of the staff’s reception.<sup>325</sup> Youth Force’s research of *The New York Times* also served as a model of media accountability work for other youth organizing groups. “They are basically looking to us to see what we did, how we did it, what we went through and what to be prepared for,” Shaquesha Alequin has explained. “We were the first and only youth of color to walk into *The New York Times* office and voice our opinions.” Nearly a year after Youth Force published their study on *The New York Times*, a newly formed coalition of youth organizers in Oakland, California consulted Youth Force in preparation for their own research on youths’ portrayals on local television news.

### *Challenging Youths’ Criminalization on Local Television News*

The Youth Media Council was launched in April 2001 as “a youth organizing, leadership development, media capacity-building, and watchdog project dedicated to amplifying the public voice of marginalized youth and their communities.”<sup>326</sup> The Youth Media Council began as a two-year pilot project of We Interrupt This

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<sup>324</sup> Avi Mermelstein, “Teens V. Times.” *City Limits Monthly*. April 2001.

<sup>325</sup> Avi Mermelstein, “Teens V. Times.” *City Limits Monthly*. April 2001.

<sup>326</sup> We Interrupt This Message, <http://www.weinterrupt.org>; Youth Media Council, <http://www.youthmediacouncil.org>. The Youth Media Council is now The Center for Media Justice, “a media strategy and action center that uses strategic communications and media activism to build a powerful movement for racial justice, economic equity, and human rights.” Center for Media Justice, <http://www.centerformediajustice.org>

Message, the same national media training and strategy center that trained and partnered with Youth Force in New York. The purpose of the project was to increase the media capacity of the youth organizing sector.<sup>327</sup> The Youth Media Council also served as a coalition in which youth from multiple organizations could come together to build power through media to shape the policies that affected their lives. The organization was located in Oakland, California and involved youth from a number of youth organizing groups in the San Francisco Bay area. Youth organizations involved in organizing around community and economic development, juvenile justice and public education were key partners in the project.<sup>328</sup> Council members were mostly low-income youth of color from organizations such as Let's Get Free, a police accountability project of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland, and the Center for Young Women's Development, a San Francisco-based agency for young women of color with experience in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many Youth Media Council members also belonged to the Bay Area's Youth Force Coalition, a coalition of youth organizations that battled issues connected to the prison industrial complex such as poor healthcare, inadequate education, and police brutality.<sup>329</sup>

The Youth Media Council had three primary areas of emphasis. They focused on 1) Media Skills-Building, which included “media training, practice and application” for youth organizers; 2) Organization-based Media Capacity-Building,

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<sup>327</sup> We Interrupt This Message, <http://www.weinterrupt.org>

<sup>328</sup> We Interrupt This Message, <http://www.weinterrupt.org>; Breyon Austin and Caresse Bray, et al., “Speaking for Ourselves: A Youth Assessment of Local News Coverage.” Oakland: Youth Media Council and We Interrupt This Message, 2000.

<sup>329</sup> The Bay area Youth Force Coalition was not directly related to or a part of the Youth Force organization in New York, discussed in the previous section.

which included “organization-based trainings, media monitoring and evaluation, tools and tips, creating press lists;” and 3) Overall Movement Building , which included “increasing strategic media coordination, deepening movement-wide media strategy, building relationships with news outlets and coordinated media accountability campaigns.”<sup>330</sup> These strategies gave birth to a range of creative projects coordinated by young people with the assistance of the Council’s three staff members who were in their twenties. Projects included the Global Justice Media School and Training for Youth Trainers in which youth acquired media skills as spokespeople, media planners and trainers. Another notable project was “The Bay Area Movement Map,” a guide to media organizations in the Bay area from TV stations to magazines with information such as office location, management and ownership. Youth organizers also produced the report, “Speaking for Ourselves: A Youth Assessment of Local News Coverage,” which focused on Oakland-based television station KTVU Channel 2, and how it portrayed youth on the 10:00 nightly news.

Fifteen youth, ranging in age from 14 to 18, were hired as the first team of Youth Media Council interns. The team of youth interns who worked on the study of KTVU was known as the Campaign Research Team because they conducted the study of KTVU, Channel 2, as foundational research for a media accountability campaign. The Team examined three months of coverage of youth on the “The 10 O’clock News” program, spanning the dates March 1 to June 15, 2001. In all, they watched 108 broadcasts, selecting all of the stories from that period that “quoted

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<sup>330</sup> Youth Media Council, <http://www.youthmediacouncil.org>.

youth, mentioned youth, or were about youth for further analysis.”<sup>331</sup> Their definition of youth included all people 25 years and younger because they found that the impact of youth policy extended to persons as old as 25. In addition, they noted that young people beyond age 18 are confined in youth prisons.<sup>332</sup> The analysis detailed in their 39-page report, “Speaking For Ourselves: A Youth Assessment of Local News Coverage” is based on 257 stories about youth and 55 stories about pets/animals. They decided to include about pets in their analysis based on the findings of an existing study that revealed there was more news coverage of animals than poverty.<sup>333</sup>

Similar to “In Between the Lines” by Youth Force, the Youth Media Council began their report by addressing the relationship between the criminalization of youth in public policy and their criminalization in the news media. But, they also devoted a large section of their introduction to emphasizing the necessity of strong relationships between news outlets and youth organizations. Youth members Andrew Vo, 14 and Aryeetey Welbeck, 17, along with staff member Malkia Cyril, 24, wrote:

The distance between the experiences and conditions of youth and the news stories about us is a landscape of media bias in which myths become public opinion and lies become public policy. We can transform media bias into media justice by building strong relationships between news outlets and youth organizations, and increasing dialogue between journalists and youth community members. Basically, though these issues are real and our families want to participate in the public debate about them, we continue to live and die on the word of experts and reporters. It is therefore critical to our survival that journalists and community members work in partnership to report on

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<sup>331</sup> Breyon Austin and Caresse Bray, et al., “Speaking for Ourselves: A Youth Assessment of Local News Coverage.” Oakland: Youth Media Council and We Interrupt This Message, 2000.

<sup>332</sup> Breyon Austin and Caresse Bray, et al., “Speaking for Ourselves: A Youth Assessment of Local News Coverage.” Oakland: Youth Media Council and We Interrupt This Message, 2000, 11.

<sup>333</sup> Lori Dorfman and Vincent Schiraldi, “Off Balance: Youth, Race and Crime in the News.” Washington, D.C., Berkeley Media Studies Group, Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice/Justice Policy Institute, 2001.



public policy issues that frame the contours of our conditions and draw the boundaries that define our lives.<sup>334</sup>

This declaration provides a clear and urgent argument for challenging stereotypes and misrepresentations of youth in the media. In stating, “we continue to live and die on the words of experts and reporters,” the authors defined journalists, scholars, and others identified as “experts” as direct contributors to violence against youth; they also identified the words of experts and reporters as weapons used to hurt them. Youth organizers also used the identification and analysis of epistemic violence to argue that working for media justice is an important part of challenging violence against youth. Following this discussion, the Campaign Researchers stressed that the organizations represented by the Youth Media Council wanted to establish relationships with local news outlets, and framed their report as one tool for increasing dialogue. They also noted that another goal was to improve the coverage of KTVU so that it could serve as a model to other news outlets.

The key findings on KTVU’s coverage were similar to the findings for *The New York Times*. The young researchers pointed out a “disproportionate focus on crime,” “missing voices,” “racial bias,” the “myth of rising youth crime,” and the “lack of context.” Over half of all the news stories on youth were about crime (162 out of 257). Only one mentioned the decline in youth crime and only two mentioned the scarcity of school shootings. Youth were quoted in only 30 percent of the stories about them (white youth at twice the rate of youth of color), while 70 percent of the quotes came from white adults. Fifty percent of the input from adults came from police, prosecutors or politicians; none were public defenders. Seven stories out of the

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<sup>334</sup> Breyon Austin and Caresse Bray, et al., “Speaking for Ourselves: A Youth Assessment of Local News Coverage.” Oakland: Youth Media Council and We Interrupt This Message, 2000, 7.

256 analyzed mentioned racism as the cause of any problem and more than 83 percent of stories on crime included a focus on incarceration as a solution, but failed to mention existing alternatives.

The study's findings on the coverage of youth policy issues were similar. The youth researchers compared the coverage of youth crime to the coverage of poverty pointing out that "despite the fact that youth poverty continues to rise and rates of youth crime and victimization continue to fall, incidents of crime received more attention than conditions of youth poverty in KTVU news coverage of youth."<sup>335</sup> They also revealed the absence of stories on educational inequality, the impact of economic policy on youth and the absence of the voices of youth advocates. But the youth researchers also found a few successes that they detailed in their findings. Unlike most news outlets, KTVU journalists did not regularly use loaded terms such as "gang" and "crackdown" or show criminalizing pictures featuring youth with "gates, bars, jail cells, handcuffs, weapons, drugs, paraphernalia, or courtrooms."<sup>336</sup>

The study, "Speaking for Ourselves," concludes with a statement targeted at journalists, youth workers and policy makers:

Although the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the ensuing war did not occur during the period of this study, we would be remiss to ignore the potential impact of news coverage on youth as it is framed by a global war against terrorism, especially because the words terrorism and terrorist have not been clearly defined. In the domestic arena, it has not been the Timothy McVeighs of the nation that have been systematically portrayed as an enemy to be feared, hated, and caged. The images of terrorists have not been of anti-abortion clinic bombers who threaten and sometimes take the lives of those seeking to ensure a women's right to choose. Instead, the images and language used to describe and depict dangerous enemies of "our way of life" have often

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<sup>335</sup> Breyon Austin and Caresse Bray, et al., "Speaking for Ourselves: A Youth Assessment of Local News Coverage." Oakland: Youth Media Council and We Interrupt This Message, 2000, 18.

<sup>336</sup> Breyon Austin and Caresse Bray, et al., "Speaking for Ourselves: A Youth Assessment of Local News Coverage." Oakland: Youth Media Council and We Interrupt This Message, 2000, 17

been poor or working-class, teenagers, U.S. immigrants, and citizens of color. “They” have been us.

The coverage of the U.S. War on Terrorism is not the first time a community has been dehumanized in the news media, depicted as an enemy to be contained, or had stories reported about them that excluded their stories, or had the impact of policies and institutions wiped clean from the versions of truth offered by the news media. Teenagers and youth, particularly youth of color, have faced similar challenges in news coverage.<sup>337</sup>

In this statement, youth identified the portrayal of Arab people in the news media (following September 11, 2001) and the portrayal of youth of color in the news media as similar kinds of epistemic violence. Although they did not use the term, “war on youth,” in this statement, the authors also asserted a parallel relationship between the images and language that called for and rationalized a “War on Terrorism” targeting Arab and Muslim people in the Middle East and the images and language used to facilitate and seemingly justify a war on young people of color in the United States.

The authors connected their work for media justice to the legacy of marginalized communities to tell their own stories and shift public opinion. They also described how these struggles over ideas are central to winning struggles over material resources, power relations, and the destiny of their communities. For example, they wrote:

For decades, marginalized communities have been attempting to participate in the public debate about them in news coverage. The struggle for public opinion is essentially the struggle for the hearts and minds of those who would, if given the opportunity, vote for alternatives to incarceration, join organizing campaigns to challenge corporate control of our communities, and fight for racial and economic justice.

In addition, the authors emphasized the necessity for youth organizations to develop relationships with youth organizations and hold corporate media institutions

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<sup>337</sup> Breyon Austin and Caresse Bray, et al., “Speaking for Ourselves: A Youth Assessment of Local News Coverage.” Oakland: Youth Media Council and We Interrupt This Message, 2000, 31.

accountable for their coverage. Lastly, they provided examples of the issues and goals of youth and community organizations in the Bay area, noting how the issues that they organize around – gentrification, rising incarceration, and increasing punitive policies – underscore the need for quality media coverage on the issues that impact the lives of youth.<sup>338</sup>

A year after the Youth Media Council began its study of KTVU, the news station hosted a dialogue between youth leaders and journalists focused on improving media coverage of youth and youth policy. The dialogue was sponsored by the Youth Media Council and took place on March 22, 2003 at the KTVU local office. The event was a public declaration that the station was responding to the issues raised by the youth organizers and wanted to work with them to make improvements. The televised dialogue “Telling Our Stories: A Youth and Journalist Roundtable,” focused on youth and youth policy in a time of war. “We are young, but we are already tired,” explained Rocio Nieves, a participant in the event and a member of the Youth Force Coalition. “Poor youth and youth of color are being killed inside, outside and at the U.S. border, and yet our stories are still invisible. We just want a chance to be heard.”<sup>339</sup> According to a Youth Media Council news release on the event, the dialogue was convened to “identify best practices in reporting on youth and discuss the newsworthy youth policy stories currently missing from coverage . . . the first step in a long-term process of building relationships between youth leaders and the media, so that youth so often scapegoated for social conditions, can move from the margins

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<sup>338</sup> Breyon Austin and Caresse Bray, et al., “Speaking for Ourselves: A Youth Assessment of Local News Coverage.” Oakland: Youth Media Council and We Interrupt This Message, 2000, 31

<sup>339</sup> Jen Soriano. “Youth Moving from the Margins of News to the Center of Public Debate: On the Brink of War, Youth and Journalists Convene in a Unique Forum to Keep the Vibrant Lives of Youth in the Public Spotlight” (Press Release). Oakland: Youth Media Council, March 17, 2003.

of society to the center of public debate.”<sup>340</sup> The Youth Media Council’s research “Speaking for Ourselves” helped to build a relationship between youth organizers and mainstream journalists. The study also served as a mechanism in which youth could use their own experiences alongside quantitative research to challenge their criminalization in the media. After their success with KTVU, youth organizers working with the Youth Media Council decided to discuss the messages touted on radio airwaves, taking on one of the largest radio conglomerates in the country.

### *Confronting Messages about Youth, Crime and Violence on the Radio*

In 2002, Youth Media Council joined forces with a community coalition of youth and adults artists and activists to launch the “Building a People’s Station” media accountability campaign, which targeted local radio station KMEL 106.1, owned by Clear Channel Media. The campaign goals included building strong relationships between KMEL and Bay Area youth activist groups; increasing access to the station by youth, youth organizers and local artists; and broadening the youth policy debates on KMEL’s talk show “Street Soldiers” to include root causes of crime and violence, alternatives to incarceration, and the voices of social justice advocates and activists.<sup>341</sup> Members of the Youth Media Council conducted research on KMEL 106.1 as a foundation for the campaign, and published their findings and analysis in the report “Is KMEL the People’s Station?: A Community Assessment of 106.1 KMEL” which they released in November 2002.

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<sup>340</sup> Jen Soriano. “Youth Moving from the Margins of News to the Center of Public Debate: On the Brink of War, Youth and Journalists Convene in a Unique Forum to Keep the Vibrant Lives of Youth in the Public Spotlight” (Press Release). Oakland: Youth Media Council, March 17, 2003.

<sup>341</sup> Youth Media Council, “‘Is KMEL The People’s Station’: A Community Assessment of KMEL 106.1.” Oakland: Youth Media Council, 2002, 5.

In their report, the youth organizers noted that while there have been a number of reports focusing on stereotypes and bias in entertainment television and movies and a growing amount of research that examines coverage of Black and Latina/o youth in newspaper and television news, there has been little to no research on biased or misleading content in urban, entertainment radio.<sup>342</sup> The YMC also chose to focus on the medium of radio because of its potential to serve as “a grassroots tool for information and action” and its accessibility to poor and young members of society. They chose the hip hop and R&B station KMEL 106.1 because of its popularity among youth and people of color in the Bay Area. At the time of their writing, more than 600, 000 people listened to KMEL.<sup>343</sup>

To conduct their study, ten youth and young adults affiliated with the Youth Media Council and the “Building a People’s Station campaign” surveyed the content of KMEL over the course of a month, focusing on “the messages and themes promoted by KMEL spokespeople.” They “listened to 24 drive-time broadcasts (6 am-10 am and 3 pm-6 pm), beginning September 10 and ending September 30, 2002; and four broadcasts of KMEL’s nationally syndicated weekly talk show, “Street Soldiers,” beginning September 15 and ending October 6, 2002.”<sup>344</sup> They surveyed this content in relation to four primary research questions: “Whose voices are heard and whose are excluded?;” “What are the primary themes raised in content?;” “Who is held responsible for problems raised in content?;” and “Are policies, root causes, or

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<sup>342</sup> Youth Media Council, “Is KMEL The People’s Station’: A Community Assessment of KMEL 1061.” Oakland: Youth Media Council, 2002, 6.

<sup>343</sup> Youth Media Council, “Is KMEL The People’s Station’: A Community Assessment of KMEL 1061.” Oakland: Youth Media Council, 2002, 3.

<sup>344</sup> Youth Media Council, “Is KMEL The People’s Station’: A Community Assessment of KMEL 1061.” Oakland: Youth Media Council, 2002, 6.

solutions mentioned in content?”<sup>345</sup> According to the authors, “Because we were most interested in the messages and themes promoted by KMEL’s spokespeople, we did not directly monitor the content of KMEL’s music except to identify whether local artists are being played on the station.”<sup>346</sup>

The study concluded that “though it calls itself the “People’s Station,” KMEL did not provide access, accountability or voice to Bay Area communities. Instead, the Youth Media Council’s report indicates: “KMEL content routinely excludes the voices of youth organizers and local activists, KMEL neglects discussion of policy debates affecting youth and people of color, KMEL focuses disproportionately on crime and violence, and KMEL has no clear avenues for listeners to hold the station accountable.”<sup>347</sup>

Youth activists recommended that KMEL clear up its Clear Channel subsidiary by promoting the voices of local youth organizers through an on-air roundtable discussion between “Street Soldiers” co-hosts and local youth activists and by playing a series of radio spots produced by young people about the issues that affect them and their families. They also asked KMEL to support local organizations by airing more public service announcements advertising peace and social justice events. In addition, Youth Media Council members requested that the station expand their coverage of youth beyond youths participation in crime and violence by talking about economic conditions, education and youths’ involvement in activism and

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<sup>345</sup> Youth Media Council, “Is KMEL The People’s Station’: A Community Assessment of KMEL 1061.” Oakland: Youth Media Council, 2002, 6.

<sup>346</sup> Youth Media Council, “Is KMEL The People’s Station’: A Community Assessment of KMEL 1061.” Oakland: Youth Media Council, 2002, 6.

<sup>347</sup> Youth Media Council, “Is KMEL The People’s Station’: A Community Assessment of KMEL 1061.” Oakland: Youth Media Council, 2002, 1.

organizing. They also asked station hosts to examine solutions to youth crime other than increased punishment, incarceration and “better personal choices,” which were typically advocated by station disc jockeys and hosts. One of their last requests was for KMEL decision makers to meet regularly with them to collectively plan how the station would implement their recommendations. On January 6, 2003, Clear Channel station executives opened their offices to a meeting with Bay area youth activists and local artists.<sup>348</sup> Within months of the report’s publication, the station also added a battle-of-the-rappers segment, a local artists mix show and brought back *The Wake Up* show, a popular program that was canceled shortly after Clear Channel took over KTVU in 1999.

Youth organizers in New York and Oakland researched the coverage of youth in local and national news produced in the first three years of the twenty first century. Their research showed that a national newspaper, local television station, and popular radio station often portrayed young people of color as violent criminals who should be incarcerated. The media they analyzed also failed to provide complex and contextualized accounts of crime and violence, and typically excluded the voices of young people and their adult advocates and allies. The youths’ research also suggests that the criminalization of youth in the news media does not occur as the result of a single story or selected images. Rather, it is the aggregation of stories of youth crime and violence repeated on multiple media outlets that frame youth of color as people to be feared, watched, and confined. These accounts of youths’ production of knowledge on this dynamic were also stories of resistance. The stories show how

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<sup>348</sup> Jeff Chang, “Urban Radio Rage? When Clear Channel Bought KMEL, It Destroyed the So-Called People’s Station. Now, the People Want It Back,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, January 22, 2003.



teenagers have worked alongside young adults to document and challenge how they are defined in the public sphere and advocate for the inclusion of stories, messages and perspectives that contribute, rather than threaten, their survival.

Whereas the youth organizers in the resistance stories shared above targeted institutions that shaped public opinion and public policy, youth organizers have also waged campaigns to challenge the public opinions and policies that resulted in part from negative media portrayals. These campaigns have also taken place outside of the two geographic areas discussed in the previous resistance stories, although there are few in depth documented accounts of youth organizing in other cities. I now turn to a resistance story of youth organizing in Washington, D.C. in order to provide an in depth account of how youth have challenged discourses and policies that defined them as violent, while lifting up an alternative discourse on youth and violence.

While telling the story of this local campaign, I pay special attention to how young people came to articulate and advance the language of a “war on youth,” which was a central element of their successful organizing efforts. This story thus illustrates one way in which the discourse of a “war on youth” emerged at the local level. First, I will provide a brief history of the Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition, explaining the Coalition’s shift to a multiracial intergenerational effort that worked to center the voices and experiences of youth and integrate community organizing. Next, I will provide a detailed history of the campaign, beginning with youths’ articulation and development of a discourse that reframed and reshaped dominant narratives and ideologies of youth and violence. Finally, in the conclusion to this chapter, I argue

that young people's development of this alternative discourse and ideology played a major role in the success of the campaign.

### *The Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition*

Justice 4 D.C. Youth Coalition! was founded in 2001 by a small group of advocates who worked on juvenile justice reform, child welfare, and youth policy issues at the local and national level.<sup>349</sup> The group came together as a result of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform. District of Columbia Mayor Anthony Williams established the Blue Ribbon Commission in August 2000, and charged its appointed members to study youth crime and safety in the District, evaluate the juvenile justice system, and present recommendations for reform based on model programs and best practices.<sup>350</sup> According to Liz Ryan, one of

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<sup>349</sup> Liz Ryan, "Justice 4 D.C. Youth History." Unpublished document in author's possession. May 27, 2009.; Shani O'Neal, Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign, 2003 – 2004, Unpublished document in author's possession, n.d..

<sup>350</sup> Here is a more detailed description of the Commission as provided in its final report: "The District of Columbia Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform (hereafter referred to as 'the Commission') was established by Mayor Anthony Williams on August 18, 2000, through Mayoral Order No. 2000-130. Commission members were charged with the responsibility to offer policy recommendations to address youth safety and the juvenile justice system. Major themes in the Commission's charge included: an assessment of youth crime prevention strategies and model programs; the identification of strengths and weaknesses in rehabilitative and supportive services and programs; an exploration of research related to the impact of youth violence and substance abuse among youth; an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of current institutional systems; and the development of strategies for serving children and youth in their communities and neighborhoods. In addition, Mayor Williams issued an explicit call for a vision and seamless network of youth service ideas that 'treat children as children.' In addition to placing a premium on the design of a juvenile justice system which simultaneously treats children as children and guards public safety, Mayor Williams expressed a desire to identify best practices that could be integrated in the District of Columbia. This process was anchored by the interdisciplinary, interagency and multi-sector background of the individuals who have served an important public service duty through their participation on this Commission. Recognizing the need for collaborative research, policy, and program frameworks to address youth safety, Commission members from a range of professional backgrounds in the public and private sectors were also united by their affirmation of the complexity of individual, family, community, and environmental factors that put children and youth at risk for crime and violence." District of Columbia Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform, *Report of the District of Columbia Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform*, (Washington, D.C., November 2001,) 7.

the Coalition's co-founders, "As the Blue Ribbon Commission began holding meetings, a small group of individuals began to attend the Commission's meetings and from those initial meetings, the Justice 4 DC Youth! Coalition (JDCY) [was] formed."<sup>351</sup> The Blue Ribbon Commission was chaired by Eugene Hamilton, the former Chief Judge of the D.C. Superior Court and included key stakeholders and experts on the juvenile justice system.<sup>352</sup> The Commission reviewed and assessed data on youth crime in the District, examined the structure of D.C.'s juvenile justice system, evaluated models and practices of other jurisdictions, and held public

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<sup>351</sup> Liz Ryan, "Justice 4 D.C. Youth History." Unpublished document in author's possession. May 27, 2009., JDCY History, May 27, 2009. Document in author's possession. Text also published online at JDCY web site: <http://www.jdyc.org>

<sup>352</sup> The Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice was comprised of the following members: Linda Bowen, Executive Director of the National Funding Collaborative on Violence Prevention (later renamed the Institute for Community Peace); Walter Broadnax, Ph.D., the Dean of the School of Public Affairs at American University; Timothy C. Coughlin, the President of Riggs National Corporation; Father Russell L. Dillard of Saint Augustine Church; Terri L. Freeman, President of the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region; the Honorable Eugene N. Hamilton, Senior Judge of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia; John Hill, Chair of the Board of Directors of the D.C. Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation; Roscoe C. Howard, Jr., U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia; Cynthia Jones, Director of the Public Defender Service; Eugene Kinlow, Board member of the D.C. Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority; Wilma A. Lewis, Former U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia (served on the Commission from July 2000 to April 2001); Robert A. Linowes, Senior Partner of Linowes & Blochehr (served from July 2000 to March 2001); Joshua Lopez, a high school student at the Maya Angelou Public Charter School; Charles A. Miller, a partner at the Covington and Burling law firm; Richard Monteil, President of the D.C. Chamber of Commerce; Charles Ruff, Attorney at Law at Covington and Burling (designated as deceased in the Commissions' report); Sharon Styles-Anderson, Senior Deputy Corporation Counsel for Public Protection and Enforcement at the Office of Corporation Counsel, Government of the District of Columbia; Reverend Karen Taylor, Vice President of the National Capital Baptist Convention Youth Division; and Carrie Thornhill, Vice President of Youth Investment and Community Outreach at D.C. Agenda. The Commission staff was comprised of Ali Basir, Director of Operations, and Special Assistant to the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Children Youth, an Families; Julie Farber, Senior Policy Analyst, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth and Families; Gerard Ferguson, Ph.D., Research Director; Lola Odubekun, Ph.D., Senior Consultant; Jeanne Oh, Senior Research Associate; and Connie Spinner, Commission Facilitator and Director of the State Education Officer. The BRC also received funding and technical assistance from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Fannie Mae Foundation. Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice, *Report of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice*. Washington, D.C.: District of Columbia Government, November 2001.

hearings to solicit community input.<sup>353</sup> JDCY's founders encouraged community members to weigh in at these public hearings.<sup>354</sup> They also strongly advocated for the BRC's recommendations to include closing Oak Hill Youth Center.<sup>355</sup>

The District of Columbia juvenile justice system has been at the center of controversy and reform efforts for decades.<sup>356</sup> Most of this controversy and reform has centered on three locked facilities for children and youth that the District of Columbia opened in the 1930s through 1940s – Oak Hill Youth Center, the Cedar Knoll Youth Center, and the Receiving Home for Children. Oak Hill was a maximum security juvenile detention facility located in Laurel, Maryland that held more than 200 youth. Cedar Knoll was located on the same grounds as Oak Hill and also confined over 200 youth. The Receiving Home was a much smaller facility located in Northeast Washington, D.C. Although these facilities confined differing numbers of youth, their conditions were very similar.

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<sup>353</sup> Jennifer Woolard and the Center on Adolescents Research and the Law, "Oak Hill Archive Project," Georgetown University. <https://digitalcommons.georgetown.edu/blogs/oakhill/documents-and-resources/blue-ribbon-commission/>

<sup>354</sup> During the spring of 2001, public hearings were held at Cardoza High School and Anacostia High School, on March 31 and April 5, respectively. Add citations – Liz Ryan history, as well as Metropolitan Police Department Web site at: [http://newsroom.dc.gov/file.aspx/release/6327/wn\\_2001-0402.pdf](http://newsroom.dc.gov/file.aspx/release/6327/wn_2001-0402.pdf)

<sup>355</sup> Liz Ryan, "Justice 4 D.C. Youth History." Unpublished document in author's possession. May 27, 2009.

<sup>356</sup> Writing in 2001, the District of Columbia Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform (discussed in subsequent paragraphs in this manuscript) noted that "'system,' is a misnomer for the various programs and strategies that bear on the experiences of youth who are detained and committed under the auspices of various juvenile justice related agencies. One of the chief reasons for the statement is the complexity brought about by the historical context, which created a problematic disjuncture between federal and local authority in the management of juvenile delinquency. ... While the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, a federal entity, has jurisdiction over the initial intake and processing of juveniles, the District of Columbia's local agencies have responsibility for pre-trial and post-adjudication placement of youth. Probation remains the province of the Superior Court through Court Social Services (CSS); aftercare is the responsibility of the local Youth Services Administration (YSA)." Report of the *Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform*, Washington, D.C., November 2001. Although this has changed substantially since 2005, I would be remiss to mention the complicated bureaucratic challenges related to the history of the federal government's control of District agencies. This problem is even more complicated by the District government's mismanagement of operations including juvenile justice, which led to federal receivership of many District government agencies and institutions throughout the years.

In 1985, the D.C. Public Defender service, in conjunction with the American Civil Liberties Union, filed a federal class action lawsuit against the D.C. government on behalf of young people incarcerated at its three youth prisons. The attorneys for the plaintiffs cited violent abuse of young people by staff, rampant overcrowding, and filthy and decrepit conditions, among many other problems. They also criticized the District's use of locked detention for children and youth who had run away from home, were truant from school, or who were awaiting shelter because they were arrested for petty offenses while homeless. That lawsuit, *Jerry M. et al vs. the District of Columbia* resulted in a federal consent decree issued in 1986, which became known as the Jerry M. decree.<sup>357</sup> The Jerry M. decree mandated that the Youth Services Administration, the District of Columbia juvenile justice agency at that time, improve conditions at the detention centers and immediately close Cedar Knoll. Cedar Knoll and the Receiving Home were finally closed in the early 1990s as a result of a number of factors, including federal intervention and continued advocacy. However, Oak Hill remained open and the conditions did not change.

By the time, Mayor Williams' Blue Ribbon Commission issued its recommendations in November 2001, the Jerry M. decree was fifteen years old and the District was still not in compliance. Noting the District's non-compliance, the Blue Ribbon Commission's recommendations cited the urgent need for the District government to immediately improve conditions at Oak Hill and bring the facility into compliance with the Jerry M. decree. They also urged the closure of Oak Hill Youth

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<sup>357</sup> A consent decree is "a judicial decree that sanctions a voluntary agreement between parties in dispute." Lisa Feldman, Michael Males, and Vincent Schiraldi. *A Tale of Two Jurisdictions: Youth Crime and Detention Rates in Maryland and the District of Columbia* (Washington, D.C.: Justice Policy Institute, October 2001.)

Center, the development of community-based alternatives to incarceration, the creation of a state-of-the art cottage-like facility for a small number of youth who may require temporary detention and/or commitment to a facility, and expanded opportunities for young people in the District.<sup>358</sup> This was an early victory for JDCY because a committee appointed by the Mayor had adopted a broad vision for positive, rather than punitive, reform of D.C.'s juvenile justice system.

JDCY's founding members also recognized that the District would not follow the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission without a public demand for change.<sup>359</sup> Thus, the all-volunteer somewhat ad-hoc group began working to institutionalize itself in order to build the capacity of JDCY to lead a citywide grassroots advocacy campaign. In February 2002, they held a film screening and forum at the Public Welfare Foundation. During the same month, they began applying for grants from local and national foundations, beginning with the Public Welfare Foundation and the Butler Family Fund, in order to raise money to hire a full-time staff person to direct to organization. In June 2002, the Public Welfare Foundation granted JDCY \$25,000. This was followed by a grant of \$10, 000 from the Butler

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<sup>358</sup> The Commission's recommendations also stated the need for: additional data and analysis to guide policy and planning, sustained research-driven efforts to reduce racial disparities, the development of state-of-the art child and youth-friendly facilities, instituting hearings before youth are transferred into the adult system ending the practice of prosecutors' as adults without a transfer hearing; an expansion of opportunities for young people particularly in the areas of employment, health, mentoring, and recreational services, and developing a new culture in the juvenile justice and youth programming sectors centered on the principles of youth development and guided by youth and community development theory and practice. District of Columbia Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform, *Report of the District of Columbia Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform*, (Washington, D.C., November 2001,) 145-150.

<sup>359</sup> Their awareness of this was bolstered by the fact that Mayor Williams, who convened the committee and ordered the development of the report, failed to substantively respond to the report or endorse the Commission's recommendations. The Blue Ribbon Commission re-released the report in 2002, due to a lack of response upon its initial release, and organized a press conference with the Mayor. Shortly after, Mayor Williams announced the development of an "implementation committee," but the committee met one time before it "ultimately disappeared from public view." Liz Ryan, Justice for D.C. Youth History. Unpublished document in author's possession. May 27, 2009.

Family Fund in July and a grant of \$20, 000 from the Trellis Fund in September.<sup>360</sup>

With this money secured, JDCY's members initiated the process to obtain a director. They hired Amoretta Morris to serve as JDCY's first director in November 2002. At that time, Morris was working as a youth organizer for Community IMPACT!, a civic engagement organization based in Northwest, D.C. According to Shani O'Neal,

When it was deemed appropriate to formalize the work of this campaign, Retta was heavily recruited to be the first staff. They thought it was necessary to move to an organizing space from an advocacy space that placed an emphasis on being able to bring young people into the work.... Conversations began about the structure of the body, the young people in the room, what it meant for professional advocates to move to a space that was about intergenerational organizing that prioritized and privileged the power of the youth voices in the room.

Morris began working to build a broad base of supporters for the Coalition's "No More Oak Hills" campaign.<sup>361</sup> She also worked to transition JDCY from a coalition primarily led by white professional policy advocates to a coalition led, at least in part, by Black and Latino youth and that incorporated youth organizing. JDCY's approach to social change integrated traditional methods of youth advocacy in which adults make decisions and act on the behalf of youth with methods of youth-led community organizing in which youth make decisions and act on behalf of themselves.

This work had its share of challenges. For example, adults had to learn how to work in close partnership and dialogue with young people, whom they were not used

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<sup>360</sup> Liz Ryan, "Justice 4 D.C. Youth History." Unpublished document in author's possession. May 27, 2009.

<sup>361</sup> The "No More Oak Hills" campaign focused on shutting down Oak Hill, increasing community-based alternatives to incarceration, and ensuring that the District would end its policy of warehousing young people in large, locked facilities. When I began attending JDCY meetings in the spring of 2003, JDCY's web site address was "nomoreoakhills.org" and all of its organizational literature highlighted the "No More Oak Hills" campaign.

to including in their meetings and deliberations about juvenile justice reform.<sup>362</sup> In addition, JDCY had brought people together around the goal of closing Oak Hill, but many youth also wanted to organize around juvenile justice issues that impacted their life on a routine basis such as police harassment and brutality.<sup>363</sup> As director, Morris worked to balance and mediate these tensions, retaining a wide number of adult stakeholders as core members, while also ensuring that young people within JDCY were able to build and wield leadership over the direction of the coalition.

Unlike New York City and Oakland, California where a strong base for youth organizing developed throughout the 1990s, there was no existing infrastructure for youth organizing in D.C.<sup>364</sup> As the director of JDCY, Morris drew on her previous job experience at Community IMPACT! While there, she and coworker Jonathan Stith transitioned their civic engagement work with young people from a youth leadership to a youth organizing framework.<sup>365</sup> Morris also worked in close dialogue with youth organizers and organizations in New York and the California Bay area. She and other JDCY members were also assisted by the staff of Listen, Inc., a national capacity-building organization founded in 1998 to support and expand youth organizing.<sup>366</sup> The broadening and renaming of JDCY's first campaign from "No More Oak Hills" to "Stop the War on D.C. Youth!" reflected the success of these efforts. The shift

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<sup>362</sup> Although a challenge, this was also a benefit. According to Morris, "It was good for the adults and professional advocates who committed their lives to working on behalf of youth but didn't have the opportunity to build these kinds of relationships with young people." Cite O'Neal.

<sup>363</sup> Shani O'Neal, "Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign, 2003 – 2004," Unpublished document in author's possession; Personal communication with Amoretta Morris

<sup>364</sup> Shani O'Neal, "Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign, 2003 – 2004," Unpublished document in author's possession.

<sup>365</sup> Shani O'Neal, "Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign, 2003 – 2004," Unpublished document in author's possession.

<sup>366</sup> Listen, Inc. was located in Washington, D.C.



meant that youth organizing had been effectively integrated into an originally adult-led advocacy coalition, and that youth leadership had grown within JDCY overall.

### *The “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!” Campaign*

In 2001, the year of JDCY’s founding, Coalition members led the “Close Oak Hill” campaign. The purpose of this campaign was to “encourage community members to weigh in on the [Blue Ribbon Commission’s] deliberation and push for the closure of Oak Hill as one of the key recommendations of the BRC.”<sup>367</sup> The “Close Oak Hill” campaign ended with the inclusion of several of JDCY’s recommendations in the final report of the Blue Ribbon Commission. In 2002, JDCY had secured a full-time executive director and launched the “No More Oak Hills” campaign. The campaign’s major goals were to close Oak Hill Youth Detention, substantially increase community-based alternatives to incarceration in the District, and end the practice of warehousing young people in large, locked prison facilities. The “No More Oak Hills” campaign came to an end not because its goals were accomplished, but because the Coalition shifted to a new campaign called “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!”

The “Stop the War on D.C. Youth” campaign began as the result of two overlapping events – the identification of a “war on youth,” by JDCY’s youth members and the introduction of a series of youth-focused bills in the D.C. City Council. Retta Morris has described the origins of the campaign as follows:

During the summer of 2003, the youth membership held several strategy sessions to begin documenting what they saw as a consistent disinvestment in

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<sup>367</sup> Liz Ryan, “Justice 4 D.C. Youth History.” Unpublished document in author’s possession. May 27, 2009.

the city's youth. They spoke of the decrease in summer jobs, loss in summer school slots, challenges in obtaining a driver's license and illegal videotaping of youth from unmarked police vehicles. They declared that city leaders were in fact waging a "war on D.C. youth." As they began to refine their insights into a campaign, that October Councilmember Chavous introduced legislation [that] would transfer younger kids to adult court, evict families from public housing and suspend parents' drivers' license [sic] if their child was adjudicated delinquent. The youth knew this was not an effective solution to anti-social behavior and the campaign was born. Since that fall, a total of nine juvenile justice reform bills were introduced by various councilmembers, most recently focusing on establishing mandatory minimum sentencing for juvenile auto-theft offenders.<sup>368</sup>

The introduction of mandatory minimum sentencing for "juvenile auto-theft offenders" toward the end of the campaign was a somewhat ironic reminder of how the wave of punitive policy legislation began.

In the summer of 2003, car thefts committed by children and teenagers increased. The news media covered these crimes extensively, labeling them, "kiddie car thefts." Most of the thefts occurred in Ward 7, a geographic area of the city located in the Southeast quadrant of Washington D.C. Ward 7 is primarily home to working-class African-American families, has one of the highest rates of poverty out of D.C.'s eight wards (second only to neighboring ward 8) and is often cited within discussions about the city's neglect of neighborhoods located East of the Anacostia River. Many residents of Ward 7, particularly the members of a ward 7 civic association, demanded that their councilmember, Kevin Chavous, take deliberate action to curb the so-called "kiddie car thefts." During the same summer, there were a number of fatal and non-fatal shootings among youth that were covered extensively by the news media and labeled as gang violence. Most of these shootings occurred in Columbia Heights, a majority working-class neighborhood of African-American,

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<sup>368</sup> Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition, "Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign" (Handout on Campaign History and Timeline), Unpublished document in author's possession, n.d.

African immigrant and Latino immigrant communities undergoing rapid gentrification.

In October 2003, Ward 7 Councilmember Kevin Chavous introduced the Juvenile Justice and Parental Accountability Act of 2003. If passed into law, the policy would permit 15 year olds to be tried as adults, fine and suspend the drivers' licenses of parents (and guardians) of children deemed delinquent, allow juvenile records to be considered as a factor in families' eligibility for public housing, open up juvenile records to victims, and move the existing 11 pm youth curfew back to 10 p.m.<sup>369</sup> According to Morris, youth "did not perceive[the proposals] as guided by a personal vendetta, but rather something that he spearheaded at the behest of his constituents."<sup>370</sup> Shortly thereafter, Mayor Anthony Williams submitted a similar bill through Council Chairperson Linda Cropp. Williams also proposed making failure to appear in court a new offense for juveniles – a measure that would impact even teenagers acquitted of the crime for which they were originally charged. It also included a measure to ease the transfer of 15-year olds to the adult system.<sup>371</sup> JDCY's policy team prepared a handout summarizing the bills [See Table 1].

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<sup>369</sup> Juvenile Justice and Parental Accountability Amendment Act of 2003," introduced by Kevin Chavous (Bill B15-0460).

<sup>370</sup> Shani O'Neal, "Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign, 2003 – 2004," Unpublished document in author's possession.

<sup>371</sup> "More than the adult transfer, youth were outraged about the proposal to fine parents... It's not [the parents'] fault if they or their friend does xyz," they said. Shani O'Neal, "Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign, 2003 – 2004," Unpublished document in author's possession.

**The 411 on Proposed “Give Up on Our Youth” Legislation**

What:	Juvenile Justice and Parental Accountability Act of 2003 (#B15-0460)
Who:	Councilmember Kevin Chavous (Ward 7)
Who else:	Co-sponsored by Councilmembers Phil Mendelson (At-large), David Catania (At-large), Harold Brazil (At Large)
What does it do?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Make it easier to try 15 year olds as adults</li> <li>2. Fine parents money of their child is delinquent</li> <li>3. Suspend parents [sic] driver’s license if their children are delinquent</li> <li>4. Allow juvenile delinquency records to be a factor in public housing eligibility</li> <li>5. Open up juvenile delinquency records to victims</li> <li>6. Roll back the youth curfew 1 hr from 11 pm to 10 pm</li> </ol>

What:	Omnibus Juvenile Justice, Victim’s Rights and Parental Participation Act of 2003 (#B15-053)
Who:	Chairperson Cropp on behalf of Mayor Williams
What does it do?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Make it easier to try 15 year olds as adults</li> <li>2. Make it a crime if a parent does not participate in a child’s rehabilitation process, punishable by a fine of up to \$1000 or jail time</li> <li>3. Open up juvenile records to other D.C. agencies</li> <li>4. Open up juvenile records to victims</li> <li>5. Make failure to appear in court a new offense</li> <li>6. Ensure separation of status offenders (runaways from truants) from delinquents</li> <li>7. Require a treatment plan for youth under YSA [Youth Services Administration] within 30 days</li> </ol>

**Table 1: The 411 on Proposed “Give Up on Our Youth” Legislation<sup>372</sup>**

<sup>372</sup> Table from Justice 4 D.C. Youth! “Action Packet.” October 2003. Unpublished document in author’s possession.

This summary of the bills [see Table 1] was distributed as part of an action packet that included a list of ways that people could take action, a sample letter to send to the Mayor and City Council, background information on key issues, and a juvenile injustice quiz. A list of “Frequently Action Questions,” began with a question that referenced the criminalization of young people by the news media:

**From all these news articles, isn’t juvenile crime on the rise in D.C. and shouldn’t we be locking up all these youth?** [emphasis in the original]

No, in fact juvenile crime is on the decline in D.C. The press only covers the most violent crime, so the public has the impression it is on the rise. Most of the youth who commit crime in D.C. are non-violent offenders, and many are drug offenders who may be selling drugs for economic reasons.<sup>373</sup>

The juvenile injustice quiz tested members on basic facts about the juvenile justice system such as the cost of incarcerating a young person at Oak Hill (Answer: \$60,000 – the cost of tuition at Harvard University – compared with \$12,000 per year to educate a youth in D.C.’s public school system, and the number of young people of color incarcerated at Oak Hill Youth Center (Answer: 100% of the youth incarcerated at Oak Hill are youth of color.)<sup>374</sup>

The action packet’s introductory letter emphasized that both bills ignored the recommendations of the panel appointed by the Mayor to provide direction on youth safety and juvenile justice reform. A draft of a blue print for alternative legislation based the Commission’s recommendations was also included in the packet, as well as a table comparing the politicians’ bills with JDCY’s proposal. [see table 2]. The action packet was first distributed at JDCY’s monthly Coalition meeting in October 2003. Over 30 people, including youth and adults, were present at the meeting.

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<sup>373</sup> Justice 4 D.C. Youth, JDCY Action Packet, October 2003.

<sup>374</sup> Justice 4 D.C. Youth, JDCY Action Packet, October 2003.

**Juvenile Justice Legislation Comparison: Which One Would You Choose?**

<b>“Mayor’s Give Up On Youth Proposal”</b>	<b>Chavous’ “Give Up On Our Youth Proposal”</b>	<b>Justice 4 D.C. Youth! Coalition “Invest in Our Youth and Families” Proposal Adopting Key Provisions of the Mayor’s Blue Ribbon Commission</b>
Sends more youth to the adult criminal justice system and adult jails where youth face risk of assault, rape and death, no education, and little to no services	Sends more youth to the adult criminal justice system and adult jails where youth face risk of assault, rape, death, no education and little to no services	Keep youth in the juvenile justice system and send LESS youth to the adult criminal justice system and to adult jails
Ignores many of the Mayor’s own Blue Ribbon Commission recommendations	Includes no recommendations from the Mayor’s Blue Ribbon Commission	Calls for adapting key provisions of the Mayor’s Blue Ribbon Commission recommendations to close Oak Hill and invest in community-based alternatives to incarceration
No funding for community-based alternatives to incarceration	No funding for community-based alternatives to incarceration	Calls for community-based alternatives that research says will DECREASE crime and INCREASE public safety
Research says it will increase crime and reduce public safety	Research says it will increase crime and reduce public safety	Focuses on rehabilitation rather than punishment, which DECREASES crime and INCREASES public safety
Could require parents to be fined or do community service if a child is found to be delinquent	Fines parents and suspends parents’ drivers licenses if a child is found to be delinquent	Holds youth accountable and recognizes that we need to provide rehabilitative programs instead of punishment
Does nothing to provide programs for kids to use their free time constructively	Expands youth curfew and misguidedly focuses on the time period in which youth have more supervision	Calls for the creation of more youth programs and services
Punishes parents for child delinquency and does nothing to help prevent delinquency	Increases homelessness by allowing parents to be denied assisted housing based upon a child’s delinquency	Wants to work with and support parents towards the rehabilitation of their children

**Table 2: Juvenile Justice Legislation Comparison**<sup>375</sup>

<sup>375</sup> Justice 4 D.C. Youth, JDCY Action Packet, October 2003. Chart reproduced as provided in the campaign packet.

Council members Harold Brazil (At-Large), Jim Graham (Ward 1), and Phil Mendelson (At-Large) introduced additional legislation within the next month. These bills reiterated many of the components in the first two bills, and incorporated additional measures such as notifying the public housing authority and public school system about youths' convictions and making it illegal to sell spray paint to any person under the age 18.<sup>376</sup> JDCY founding member Liz Ryan, who now directs the Campaign for Youth Justice, called the entire package of proposals "some of the most draconian measures I've ever seen."<sup>377</sup> All of the bills were promoted under the mantra of decreasing youth violence and increasing public safety.

I contend that multiple factors led to the barrage of repressive policies, including genuine concerns about property crime and peer violence by youth, extensive and exaggerated coverage of crime and violence by Black and Latino youth in the news, and a growing number of white high-income residents in working-class D.C. neighborhoods. There were also demands by adults of various racial and class backgrounds that the city "crack down" on youth. In addition, the policies were introduced one year before the 2004 election. While not all city council members who introduced punitive policies were running for re-election, they could still benefit from responding to news coverage and selected constituents' demands. According to a

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<sup>376</sup> See "Juvenile Justice and Parental Accountability Amendment Act of 2003," introduced by Kevin Chavous (Bill B15-0460); "Juvenile Justice Act of 2003," introduced by Phil Mendelson, Kevin Chavous, and Jim Graham (Bill B15-0574); "Restricting Minors' Access to Graffiti Materials Amendment Act of 2003," introduced by Jim Graham and Harold Brazil (Bill B15-0523); "Omnibus Juvenile Justice, Victim's Rights and Parental Participation Act of 2003," proposed by Mayor Anthony Williams and introduced by Linda Cropp (Bill B15-0537); "Public Access to Juvenile Justice Amendment Act of 2004," introduced by Kathleen Patterson, Jack Evans, Harold Brazil, and Sharon Ambrose (Bill B15-0666); "Blue Ribbon Juvenile Justice and Youth Rehabilitation Act of 2004," introduced by Adrian Fenty (Bill B15-0673); "Juvenile Justice Task Force Establishment Act of 2003," introduced by Harold Brazil (Bill B15-0573).

<sup>377</sup> Cite O'Neal.

report on the bills' potential impact on Latino residents, politicians were also trying to reduce the perception that a lenient juvenile justice system was partly to blame for "youth violence."<sup>378</sup>

The Justice 4 D.C. Youth Coalition needed to influence public opinion and shift the debate. Advancing the discourse of a "war on youth" was one of the most important components of these efforts. As previously mentioned, this language first emerged from youth involved in JDCY who were mapping the trends impacting them even before the punitive proposals were introduced in the fall of 2003. Morris, who facilitated most of these meetings, has recounted what she heard from youth:

There's an ill equipped summer youth employment program that wasn't working very well, not many can participate, it's not organized, and then the issues with the educational system, people feeling like the education was inadequate and young people aren't being asked about the policies being implemented that impacted their lives. Oak Hill became a part of that but that was one of many things that they mapped out and felt was a negative harmful policy.<sup>379</sup>

There was also a great deal of discussion by youth about their treatment by the police.<sup>380</sup> As the legislative bills began pouring in during the fall, JDCY members began a large-scale outreach effort to educate youth throughout the city about the

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<sup>378</sup> Washington Lawyers Committee on Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, National Council of La Raza, et al. "District of Columbia Responses to Youth Violence: Impact on the Latino Community." September 2004.

<sup>379</sup> Shani O'Neal, "Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign, 2003 – 2004," Unpublished document in author's possession.

<sup>380</sup> Notes from Shani O'Neal's 2008 interview with Retta Morris state, "One of the hot button issues of the time is that there were police in [police district] 3D that were stopping young people and photographing them to add the shots to what was understood at the time to be a gang database (Verify this) [sic]. At the time the police department was working to define the parameters of emerging Latino gang activity in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. Many of the youth attending coalition meetings complained that they had experienced this or knew someone that had. This practice was contained to that area, it was not city wide. There were competing ideologies as to the genesis of this effort, was it a formally instituted departmental procedure or was it a couple of officers on their own program? This was a moment when legislation and police behavior were converging in a way that was deemed detrimental to the young people of the city. This confluence was the catalyst for people to start developing a political analysis around what was happening." Shani O'Neal, "Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign, 2003 – 2004," Unpublished document in author's possession.



proposals. According to Morris, “many of the youth reacted by saying, ‘it’s become a war on us!’”<sup>381</sup>

As the result of youth’s initial identification of a “war on youth” before the policies were introduced and the continuing identification of a “war on youth” in youths’ reaction to the policies, “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!” became the name of JDCY’s campaign to challenge the policies and push an alternative bill through the legislature. At the same time, “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!” was also a demand to end the broader climate of criminalization against Black and Latino youth and expand supports, services and opportunities for young people throughout the city.

The campaign name took on a life of its own, as it resonated deeply with many, as it alluded to an array of issues that young people were struggling with at the time. It allowed youth to collectively formulate the myriad ways they felt the city, its institutions and adults at large carried perceptions of them that criminalized purely adolescent behavior.<sup>382</sup>

“Stop the War on D.C.! Youth” also reshaped the dominant discourse of youth and violence. The campaign slogan was printed on all of JDCY’s flyers, action packets, letters, and calls to action. It was the campaign’s primary rallying cry.

Although many young people already possessed a critical awareness of the system and its violence against them, JDCY also recognized the need for a program that would support youth in further developing their analysis. They also needed a vehicle to further develop the leadership of youth within JDCY and the “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!” campaign. As JDCY’s director and lead youth organizer, Amoretta Morris began working with the staff of Listen, Inc., a youth organizing capacity-building organization, to develop an initial concept paper for a political education

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<sup>381</sup> Shani O’Neal, “Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign, 2003 – 2004,” Unpublished document in author’s possession.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

program. They titled the program, FIRE! Freedom Involves a Revolutionary Education. Next, a team of young adults in their twenties who were also active in the Coalition began working with them to develop the curriculum. The original curriculum outlined five two and half hour sessions to be held bi-weekly over a two-month period, beginning December 17, 2003 and ending February 18, 2004. The curriculum was comprised of a series of interactive workshops and presentations that placed JDCY's "Stop the War on D.C. Youth!" campaign within a national context of a growing prison-industrial complex, national climate of youth criminalization, and a mass organizing movement led by young people of color. There were also activities that introduced youth to the concept of adultism, the basics of community organizing, the role of resistance in bringing about social change, and the historical legacy of youth-led organizing in Black and Latino communities. Although FIRE! was not ready to be launched for several more months, the curriculum development team continued planning throughout the fall and winter of 2003. At the same time, they were also involved in other "Stop the War on D.C. Youth!" campaign activities.

In November 2003, JDCY hosted a "Youth Justice Faith Breakfast" to educate and mobilize clergy and their congregations.<sup>383</sup> They also organized a "Youth Justice Advocacy Day" held in early December. Over 20 youth and adults came out to talk with City Council members, rally outside of City Hall (the Wilson Building), and announce the official launch of the campaign. The large group included staff and members from the city's leading violence prevention, youth advocacy, and community development organizations. Later that month, JDCY's policy team began

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<sup>383</sup> The Youth Justice Faith Breakfast was co-sponsored by the Youth Law Center and Human Rights Watch.

working with D.C. Councilmember Adrian Fenty (Ward 4) to craft alternative legislation reflecting the Blue Ribbon Commission's recommendations.<sup>384</sup> In January 2004, they finished drafting the legislation and Fenty introduced the alternative Blue Ribbon Bill into the City Council. The Blue Ribbon Bill's measures would prohibit the transfer of youth to the adult system, close Oak Hill Youth Center, and expand community-based alternatives to incarceration, among other items including in the Blue Ribbon Commission's original.<sup>385</sup> JDCY members educated youth, parents and other community members about each piece of legislation and its impacts and requested local and national organizations to sign on to letters endorsing the Blue Ribbon Bill.<sup>386</sup> On January 13, a sign-on letter endorsed by over 40 organizations was delivered to the City Council. The next day, the first round of hearings began. These hearings were held by the Judiciary Committee, which was responsible for developing a single bill based on all of the legislative proposals. The bill approved by the Judiciary Committee, which was chaired by Council member Kathy Patterson, would then be sent out and voted on by the full City Council.

Hundreds of young people and adults poured into City Hall to testify against the punitive proposals, which were sponsored or co-sponsored by nearly every member of the D.C. City Council. They also testified in support of the alternative

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<sup>384</sup> Adrian Fenty was the chair of the Human Services Committee, which was responsible for overseeing the Youth Services Administration (D.C.'s juvenile justice agency at that time.) In December 2003, the policy team began working with Fenty's office to craft alternative legislation. They worked especially closely with his staff person Will Singer. In January 2004, Fenty introduced the Blue Ribbon Bill, which would institute many of the recommendations of the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform. Measures included the closure of Oak Hill and its replacement with small community-based facilities as well as alternatives to detention, such as evening reporting centers, home detention, and intensive case management.

<sup>385</sup> The Blue Ribbon Juvenile Justice and Youth Rehabilitation Act of 2004 (Bill #B15-673).

<sup>386</sup> Although youth under 18 could not legally vote, they could still talk to their city council members, testify at hearings, and turn out to protests and rallies.

Blue Ribbon Bill that JDCY members helped to write behind the scenes. By this time, the JDCY staff had grown from one to two, as Portia, a young woman in her teens, had been hired to serve as a part-time youth organizer. Leading up to the hearings, JDCY staff and members contacted journalists to ensure press coverage of the hearings. They also wrote and submitted op-eds and letters to the editor for publication in small neighborhood newspapers, as well as large newspapers such as the *Washington Post*. In March, the Judiciary Committee held a second round of hearings. JDCY successfully pressured them to schedule the hearings during the evening so that youth and parents could attend, and to hold the hearings in a location that was easily accessible to the youth and families who would be most impacted by the legislation.

The March hearings were held at Savoy Elementary School, which was located in the Anacostia neighborhood of Southeast D.C. directly across the street from the Anacostia Metro Station. The room was filled wall-to-wall with people lining up and congregating to testify at the small table erected at the front of the elementary school auditorium. While two or three people sat down at the table to speak, large groups of mostly African-American and Latino youth and adults from D.C.'s working-class neighborhoods stood behind them.

“When Patterson [the chair of the Judiciary Committee] saw hundreds of people coming in and out of the hearings, packing the rooms, lining up outside, there was no way [for her] not to feel that [the initial] legislation wasn’t the most punitive far reaching stuff ever.”<sup>387</sup>

The people who came out to testify, stand in solidarity, or simply turn out for the hearings were also impacted by their involvement. The hearings were a space for

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<sup>387</sup> Shani O’Neal, “Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign, 2003 – 2004,” Unpublished document in author’s possession.

people to learn about how other individuals and communities felt about legislation that directly impacted their lives. The hearings built community strengthened coalition-building across lines of race, class, gender and generation, and provided a visceral way for people to experience their own power and “the power of the people.”

Shortly after the hearings, JDCY began working with members of the D.C. chapter of Critical Resistance, a prison abolitionist organization, to develop a wide-scale postcard campaign. They printed colorful, eye-catching postcards that said “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!” on one side. On the other side, there was a short message directed to City Council members in support of the Blue Ribbon Bill. In May 2004, thousands of postcards were printed and members of JDCY and Critical Resistance began distributing them throughout the city – at open mics, bus stops, meetings, churches, and corner stores. The postcards, which included a summary of the Blue Ribbon Bill, simultaneously educated people about the legislation and provided them with an immediate and easy way to act. All they needed to do was sign the bottom of the postcard to indicate their support for the Blue Ribbon Bill, and write in their address at the top of the postcard. JDCY members collected the postcards and sent them to the appropriate City Council member.<sup>388</sup>

As the summer of 2004 approached, JDCY directed and coordinated hundreds of phone calls and e-mails to the City Council in support of the Blue Ribbon Bill. They also led a public outcry against additional proposals that Council members

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<sup>388</sup> Postcards signed by D.C. residents were automatically sent to the signers’ own City Council member, and postcards from non-D.C. residents would be directed to at-large members. However, there was also a highly strategic process involved, whereby JDCY constantly assessed Council members’ stance on the proposed legislation, and directed more postcards to those who were furthest away from supporting the Blue Ribbon Bill.

Harold Brazil and David Catania introduced in June 2004, which called for mandatory minimum sentences for young people convicted of stealing cars. During the summer of 2004, JDCY also launched FIRE!, the political education institute that they began planning in the fall of 2003. The training was held at the office of The Youth Action Research Group (YARG), a youth organization that was an organizational member of the Coalition.<sup>389</sup> Meanwhile, YARG's summer youth staff was holding focus groups with young people across the city. They asked youth what they thought about the proposed policies and solicited youths' perspectives on the root causes of violence among youth.<sup>390</sup> Although their research report, "A Reality Tour of Youth Violence," was not released until after the end of "Stop the War on D.C. Youth!" campaign, their research project engaged more youth in the campaign and deepened the knowledge and analysis of YARG's members. YARG members presented this analysis during their testimony at City Council hearings, among other venues. In the middle of the summer, while youth members were engaged in an intensive political education process and YARG was conducting research, the Judiciary Committee released the bill that they were sending out to the full Council for initial reading and discussion. The bill, which sought to combine various elements of all of the legislation on the table, included a proposal to close Oak Hill!

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<sup>389</sup> The Youth Action Research Group was founded in 1998. It emerged in the aftermath of a student-led walkout at Bell Multicultural High School (located in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Northwest Washington, D.C.) Natalie Avery, a white resident of Columbia Heights, heard about what was happening and came out to support the Black and Latino students. She helped them to plan a teach-in while the school was closed and shortly after, a weekly discussion group, which became a weekly club. Avery went on to found the Youth Action Research Group (YARG). In its early years, YARG was a project hosted by Georgetown University that trained and paid youth to conduct participatory action research. Their first research project was on the gentrification of Columbia Heights. As the organization further developed, it became independent from Georgetown and grew to incorporate youth organizing in addition to participatory action research.

<sup>390</sup> YARG's focus groups also integrated Freirian-style political education. When youth would repeat the dominant scripts on youth and violence that they learned from the media, YARG's youth staff, would push them to think deeper without telling them what to think.

Furthermore, it did not include a measure to lower the age to transfer youth as adults. JDCY recognized this as a major campaign victory!

Building on this victory, JDCY members coordinated teams of people from every ward in the city to meet with City Council members about the Omnibus bill throughout October and November. In September, the policy team prepared a packet called, “Stop the War on D.C. Youth! A guide to meeting with your councilmember” that provided the teams with instructions for conducted meeting with council members and provided detailed talking points to guide their discussions in the meetings. Calls, e-mails, postcards, and sign-on letters also continued to pour into Council members’ offices. JDCY’s members, allies, and friends had also begun integrating the campaign into various aspects of their personal lives. For example, in October 2004, JDCY began distributing thousands of blue wristbands printed with the words, “Educate Don’t Incarcerate” in large white letters. When YARG member LaKeisha McKinley celebrated her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday later that month, she and other YARG members distributed the wristbands to the guests at her birthday party.

On November 5, 2004, the mood of the city and much of the nation was intensely somber. George W. Bush had just been re-elected as President of the United States. That same day, JDCY’s Director Retta Morris e-mailed the members of the steering committee to request that they assemble for a much needed meeting:

I know for many of us this day is a bit surreal to say the least. Even though our heads and hearts are consumed by national affairs, I humbly ask you to consider your ability to meet as a FULL Steering Committee on MONDAY, November 8th, 2004 from 6-8pm....Last Friday, we met with CM David Catania who isn't budging. Today some of us are meeting with CM Jim Graham at 4pm. On Tuesday, November 9th, the DC Council will reconsider the Omnibus JJ bill. ...There is consensus building for a community empowerment rally on

or around Wednesday, December 1st to celebrate our campaign wins to date. And, our annual Holiday Party with the national jj coalition is scheduled for December 7th. ...

We have run an AMAZING city-wide campaign over the past year! More than that, we have built an organization from the ground up over the past 3 years and dramatically transformed the terms of the debate about young people in the juvenile justice system.<sup>391</sup> ...

At the same time, JDCY's funds were dwindling and they still had only one full-time staff member, director Amoretta Morris, whose capacity was stretched to the limits.

How much longer could JDCY sustain a citywide campaign on shoestring resources?

On November 9, 2004, the D.C. City Council met to consider the second version of the Omnibus Juvenile Justice Bill sent out of the Judiciary Committee. During this second reading, there was consensus to make final amendments and take a vote. The council passed a bill that included many of the measures that JDCY had been pushing for the previous 13 months. A week later, Morris e-mailed a summary of the Council's decision to JDCY's listserv, copying youth organizers around the country so that they too could celebrate another victory for the movement.

Would you believe... WE WON! Though it has largely been lost amidst the recent baseball stadium-related mania, on Tuesday, November 9th the DC Council actually voted on final amendments and passed the final version of the Omnibus Juvenile Justice Act of 2004. Following almost a full year of debate by the Council, and advocacy efforts going back over 2 years, we are pleased to report that our hard work has achieved significant results. This hard-earned victory would not have been possible without you. Know that your postcards, phone calls, emails, personal visits and testimonies made this advancement possible. Whether your organization signed one of our many letters or you proudly wore our fashionable, blue "Educate Don't Incarcerate" wristband, we thank you. We lift up this victory as a testament to what can happen when young people and adults come together across age, ethnicity, background and geographical neighborhood to demand that the city's leadership invest in youth development over mere punishment. We have the power to shift public opinion and public policy!

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<sup>391</sup> Retta Morris, E-mail communication to JDCY Listserv members, November 2004.



Although the final bill is not necessarily the legislation that we would have drafted, it is a very significant improvement over the bills originally introduced by Mayor Williams, Councilmember Chavous and others, and includes provisions from the recommendations of the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform for which we had been advocating since 2001. ...

We, of course, know that this is not the end. Our efforts to lift up a new vision of youth justice in the District did not begin with fighting this punitive legislation, nor will it end here.....<sup>392</sup>

The e-mail also included details on an upcoming celebration and fundraising event.

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<sup>392</sup>Regarding the reference to "baseball-related mania," during the fall of 2004, the District government was considering whether or not to divert millions of city dollars toward building a baseball stadium in D.C. near the Anacostia River. Although many protested this use of the city's funds, the District decided to divert money toward the stadium, which also brought D.C. the Nationals baseball team.

### **“Stop the War on D.C. Youth!” Campaign Timeline**

Spring/Summer 2003	Youth Strategy Meetings about the “War on Youth”
October 7, 2003	Councilmember Chavous introduces bill to 1) make it easier to transfer youth into the adult system 2) evict families from public housing if their children are caught in the system, 3) suspend parents’ drivers’ licenses if their children get caught in the system
October 2003	Mayor Williams and Councilmember Graham introduce bills
November 2003	Councilmember Brazil and Councilmember Mendelson introduce bills
Nov. 14, 2004	Youth Justice Faith Breakfast co-sponsored by JDCY, YLC [Youth Law Center] & HRW [Human Rights Watch]
Dec. 10, 2003	Youth Justice Advocacy Day at the Wilson Building Official Campaign Launch
December 2003 – January 2004	JDCY Policy team works with Councilmember Fenty’s office to introduce alternative reform bill
January 2004	Councilmember Fenty introduces alternative Blue Ribbon Bill, which would 1) prohibit the transfer of youth to adult prison and 2) close Oak Hill Youth Center and replace it with smaller, community based facilities and treatment options recommended by the Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform in Nov. 2001
Jan. 13, 2004	JDCY sign-on letter w/40 organizational signatures delivered to D.C. Council
Jan. 14 & 16, 2004	First D.C. Council Public Hearings about the bills Hundreds of youth and adults turn out to testify against legislation
Jan. 15, 2004	In the news ...Washington Post, WPFW 89.3, News Channel 8, AC7
February 2004	JDCY Op-ed printed in East of the River community newspaper
March 2004	2 <sup>nd</sup> D.C. Council Public Hearing at Savoy Elementary. More youth and adults turn out to support Fenty’s alternative Blue Ribbon bill
May 2004	JDCY launches postcard campaign w/Critical Resistance D.C.
June 2004	Councilmembers Brazil and Catania introduce bills for mandatory minimum sentences for auto-theft JDCY coordinates phone call and e-mail campaign opposing bills
July 2004	D.C. Council Judiciary Committee approves Omnibus bill with proposal to close Oak Hill and elimination of transfer measure [eliminating measure to lower the age of youth transfer to the adult system]
July – August 2004	JDCY hosts F.I.R.E. Summer Youth Political Education Institute
October 5, 2004	1 <sup>st</sup> reading of Omnibus Juvenile Justice Bill by full Council
October 2004	“Educate Don’t Incarcerate” wristbands debut
Nov. 8, 2004	JDCY sign-on letter w/24 organizational signatures delivered to D.C. Council
Nov. 9, 2004	2 <sup>nd</sup> Reading and Final Vote on Omnibus Juvenile Justice Bill; Measure to make “failure to appear” in court a new offense defeated; Full bill passes
Nov. 29, 2004	Mayor signs Omnibus Juvenile Justice Act of 2004

**Table 3:** Stop the War on D.C. Youth Campaign Timeline<sup>393</sup>

<sup>393</sup> This timeline is reproduced in its entirety from a summary of the campaign developed by JDCY staff at the end of the campaign. Justice 4 D.C. Youth, ““Stop the War on D.C. Youth!’ Campaign.” Unpublished document in author’s possession. n.d.

On November 29, 2004, D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams signed the Omnibus Juvenile Justice Act of 2004. The law called for the creation of a juvenile justice system that will “treat children as children in all phases of their development,” the original mandate that he had given the Blue Ribbon Commission in 2001, but completely neglected in his own proposed legislation. Consistent with the Coalition’s call for an end to large juvenile prisons that warehouse youth, the Omnibus Juvenile Justice Act mandated that the City close Oak Hill Juvenile Detention Center within four years and expand community-based alternatives to incarceration. In addition, the law established goals for D.C.’s juvenile justice system that include promoting youth development, preserving and strengthening families, and serving young people in their own neighborhoods and communities, whenever possible. The radical shift from draconian legislation that would drastically increase youth incarceration to legislation that called for a decrease in youth confinement was the result of an intergenerational grassroots organizing campaign in which youth developed and mobilized an effective discourse that flipped the public script on youth and violence. The campaign’s success was also attributed to the fact that it did not exclusively focus on squelching punitive policies. Youth, adults, families and organizations, were mobilized in support of alternatives. Everyone who participated in the campaign was involved in “lifting up a new vision of youth justice in the District,” which was JDCY’s motto.

### *Conclusion*

Oak Hill Youth Center was finally closed for good on May 29, 2009. On the same day, New Beginnings, a small state-of-the art detention center for youth opened

on the same grounds. Whereas Oak Hill was a 186-bed facility, New Beginnings only has space for 60 youth. In the four and a half years between the signing of the Blue Ribbon Bill in November 2004 and the official closure of Oak Hill in May 2009, the District opened a number of community-based programs as alternatives to secure detention. They expanded group homes, added two evening reporting centers, and instituted intensive counseling and case management programs in which youth could receive support while living at home with their families. These are only some of the bevy of alternative programs that were created in the wake of the campaign. But, the D.C. government did not continue progress entirely of its own accord.

JDCY continued to push implementation of the legislation. For example, in the spring of 2005, JDCY worked with Council member Fenty's office to organize a City Council hearing inside Oak Hill Detention Center! The hearing resulted in legislation that mandated Oak Hill close 7 months before the 5-year deadline given in the 2004 Omnibus Act. In addition, the "Stop the War on D.C. Youth!" campaign had so changed the climate of the city that leading juvenile justice advocates were appointed to run the juvenile justice system and develop the city's youth policies. For instance, Vincent Schiraldi, one of JDCY's founding members, was selected as the first director of the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, a new cabinet-level agency responsible for running the District's juvenile justice system.<sup>394</sup> The next year, Amoretta Morris, JDCY's first director, was asked to serve as D.C.'s Senior Advisor for Youth Development and Policy. Morris accepted the position.

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<sup>394</sup> The Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services was legislated shortly after the passage of the Juvenile Justice Omnibus Act of 2004.

Nearly a year before the official launch of JDCY's "Stop the War on D.C. Youth!" campaign, a journalist writing for the *Washington Informer*, one of the D.C.'s leading Black newspapers foresaw what it would take to shift the direction of D.C.'s juvenile justice system. In an article published on October 23, 2002, Michael Frances wrote:

Despite 16 years of litigation-Jerry M. et al v. the District of Columbia or commonly known as "The Jerry M Consent Decree"-, living conditions and services remain inadequate for youths detained at the District of Columbia's juvenile detention facility (the decrepit 188 bed Oak Hill Youth Center located in Laurel, Maryland). And they will continue to be inadequate until, and only until, the majority of DC citizens-not just the plaintiffs' attorneys in the Jerry M Consent Decree and DC Superior Court Judges-demand that the District government improve living conditions and services for juveniles held at Oak Hill.<sup>395</sup>

From 2002 to 2004, the District government remained in violation of the Jerry M. decree. As a result of the continuing deplorable conditions for youth confined at Oak Hill, the Youth Services Administration was on the brink of federal receivership. The attorneys for the plaintiffs in the Jerry M. case finally halted proceedings to transfer the D.C. government agency into the hands of the federal government following the beginning of significant improvements led by Vinnie Schiraldi, the new head of the juvenile justice system. This change in course was another dimension of the visible institutional transformation that resulted from the campaign. The District's juvenile justice system is now considered a shining model of juvenile justice reform by institutions and systems around the nation. For example, Harvard University listed D.C.'s juvenile justice system as among the top 50 programs in the innovation in American government and one the top 8 models for children and family system

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<sup>395</sup> Michael Frances, "The District's Juvenile Injustice System – Who Cares?," *The Washington Informer*, October 23, 2002.

reform in September 2008.<sup>396</sup> What has often been lost in the accolades and missing from discussions of the reform is that youth and adults organized to bring about this transformation. Yet, there were also transformations that were much less visible and tangible.

There were significant transformations in language, ideology, and discourse that emerged throughout the process of the “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!” campaign. Discussions of violence in the news media focused on “youth,” particularly youth of color.<sup>397</sup> Although the most common images of “youth violence” in the media spotlighted gun violence among Black and Latino boys, girls were also identified as participants in gangs, gang violence and violent conflicts among neighborhood crews. The prevailing discourse and framework of “youth violence” also limited discussions on youth and violence to acts of individual violence among young people. In the conversations in which youth named and discussed the “War on Youth,” they pointed out the violence of criminalization, the violence of abandonment by government institutions, and the violence of policies designed to facilitate confinement in a detention center that was infamous for abuse. Young people also worked alongside adults to inject their discourse and frame into public debate, broadening conceptualizations of violence to include epistemic violence, cultural violence, institutional violence, and state-sponsored violence, although they did not use those

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<sup>396</sup> Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation, “2008 Innovation in American Government Awards,” Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Kennedy School of Government, 2008. [http://www.ashinsttest.org/ezdeal.no/corporate\\_site/innovations#631](http://www.ashinsttest.org/ezdeal.no/corporate_site/innovations#631)

<sup>397</sup> I do not only specify Black and Latino youth here because Asian and Native youth are also targets of criminalization. Soo Ah Kwon’s research discusses this dynamic in relation to Asian youth, particularly Southeast Asian youth, in California. She also discusses the participation of Asian youth in youth organizing for juvenile justice. Soo Ah Kwon, “Youth of Color Organizing for Juvenile Justice” in *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America’s Youth*, ed. Shawn Ginwright, Pedro Noguera, and Julio Cammarota, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 215 – 228.

terms. They not only re-conceptualized the very meaning of violence, but also re-organized the terms defining the relationship between youth and violence.

By advancing a discourse of “a War on Youth,” young people situated themselves as on the receiving end of violence, but not violence by other young people. They were talking about the violence committed against them by politicians, their local government, and those adults and institutions that did more to harm them than actively work for their safety and well-being. By turning this frame into a demand, “Stop the War on D.C. Youth,” they also indicated that they were not passive victims of violence. They showed that they had agency and were capable and engaged in resistance. The broad base of adults and organizations involved in taking up the slogan meant that young people were not by themselves in naming the violence, recognizing the violence, and working to stop it. The slogan, “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!” and the images and issues it referenced reflected a different perspective on youth and violence, a different ideology. Its wide-scale adoption as the central rallying cry of JDCY’s citywide organizing campaign helped to transform the ideological landscape.

In “Beyond Policy: Ideology, Race, and the Reimagining of Youth,” Daniel Hosang examines how “youth-led activist groups use community organizing to contest the discourses used to define and explain social problems and crises and to re-imagine the world through alternative logics, ideas and frameworks.”<sup>398</sup> Hosang explains that repressive approaches by both conservatives and liberals and “the

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<sup>398</sup> Daniel Hosang, “Beyond Policy: Race, Ideology, and the Reimagining of Youth” in *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America’s Youth*, ed. Shawn Ginwright, Pedro Noguera, and Julio Cammarota (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.

discourses they mobilize through these conflicts naturalize a particular vision of the social world.”<sup>399</sup> In other words, punitive policies and discourses not only limit how people think about problems, but also what people see as possible solutions. When young people use community organizing as a platform to advance discourses reflecting their perspectives and ideas, they widen the terms of the debate and the scope of political vision. Hosang also points out that youth engaged in organizing do not work by themselves.<sup>400</sup> Adults often serve as facilitators of critical dialogue who push young people to express and further develop their analysis.<sup>401</sup> This analysis often leads to the articulation of powerful words, terminologies and images through which youth explain their conditions.<sup>402</sup> The words and images that young people create and advance also shape the ways that other people understand their conditions and respond.<sup>403</sup> Justice 4 D.C. Youth Coalition’s “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!” campaign is a powerful example of this theory in action.

This chapter also offered an important look at how young people involved in community organizing have used research to name and challenge criminalizing

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<sup>399</sup> Daniel Hosang, “Beyond Policy: Race, Ideology, and the Reimagining of Youth” in *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America’s Youth*, ed. Shawn Ginwright, Pedro Noguera, and Julio Cammarota (New York: Routledge, 2006), 7.

<sup>400</sup> Daniel Hosang, “Beyond Policy: Race, Ideology, and the Reimagining of Youth” in *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America’s Youth*, ed. Shawn Ginwright, Pedro Noguera, and Julio Cammarota (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3 - 20.

<sup>401</sup> Daniel Hosang, “Beyond Policy: Race, Ideology, and the Reimagining of Youth” in *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America’s Youth*, ed. Shawn Ginwright, Pedro Noguera, and Julio Cammarota (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3 - 20; Soo Ah Kwon, “Second Generation Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Social Change Practices,” (Ph.D. Diss., Berkeley, California, 2005).

<sup>402</sup> Daniel Hosang, “Beyond Policy: Race, Ideology, and the Reimagining of Youth” in *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America’s Youth*, ed. Shawn Ginwright, Pedro Noguera, and Julio Cammarota (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3 - 20

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.



portrayals of young people of color in the news media. In the first half of this chapter, I discussed three research studies conducted by youth on the criminalization of youth in the news media. My discussion illuminated how young people of color have documented local and national climates of criminalization. This part of the chapter also provided important background information for understanding the story of the Justice 4 D.C. Youth Coalition's "Stop the War on D.C. Youth!" campaign, which I unfolded in the latter half. One important piece of background information is the existence of a national youth organizing movement that emerged in the 1990s. This movement has been particularly strong and well-developed in Oakland and New York City, the cities in which the research studies I describe were conducted. Another important lesson from the research studies I discussed is the close relationship between the mainstream media's criminalization of youth and politicians' development of punitive public policies. Young people repeatedly emphasized this relationship in their research. The second half of this chapter focused on the Justice 4 D.C. Youth Coalition's "Stop the War on D.C. Youth!" campaign. My narrative described the history of the Justice 4 D.C. Youth Coalition! and the background of the campaign, the activities that comprised the 13-month long organizing effort, and the dynamics that contributed to the campaign's success.

My next chapter concludes this dissertation. Thus far, I have emphasized the positive contributions and critical interventions that youth have made when advancing their own critical perspectives, discourses and frameworks on violence. In my conclusion, I review these perspectives, discourses and frameworks. I also take another look at them in order to highlight and discuss their limitations. I consider

major questions that remain about how young people advance critical understandings of youth and violence. I also talk about some of the ways in which youth and youth organizations are already working to answer these questions and fill these gaps.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

### *Overview*

In this dissertation, I discussed the analysis of violence that young people have advanced through the use of hip hop music and community organizing. My analysis situated youths' theoretical and ideological contributions within the climates of criminalization in which they produced them. I also shared concealed stories, counter-stories and resistance stories that challenge the existing stock stories on youth and violence. The concealed and counter-stories I shared in chapter three highlighted the intellectual contributions of young Black hip hop artists, while the resistance stories I shared in chapter four illuminated the analysis, discourses and practices of youth of color in multiracial coalitions and youth organizing groups. My discussion shows how youths' stories, analysis, discourses and practices challenge historical and contemporary stock stories of youth and violence, and advance critical understandings of violence in climates of criminalization.

### *Arguments*

This dissertation advances three primary arguments in relation to criminalization, discourses on youth and violence, youth agency, and social change. Firstly, this dissertation argues that the criminalization of youth of color is a form of epistemic and cultural violence against youth. The discourse and spectre of "youth violence" is used as a central component within these practices and processes of criminalization, which constitute epistemic and cultural violence. The discourse of "youth violence" calls for and rationalizes state and structural violence against Black

youth and other young people of color in the form of incarceration, political economic abandonment and other carceral and neoliberal practices that facilitate harm and injury against youth.

Secondly, I argue that Black youth as well as other youth of color have asserted their intellect and agency through challenging these processes using a variety of cultural and political practices:

- Black youth have used hip hop music as a form of cultural activism to reflect and inform youths' political consciousness and challenge public opinion and mainstream analysis. Their work redefines what counts as violence, who is involved in violence, and why violence among youth occurs. It also suggests solutions for challenging violence without relying on the practices that youth expose as violence against them through their music.
- Youth have engaged in participatory action research and media accountability campaigns to influence and change the content of mainstream media in which they are portrayed as violent criminals.
- Youth have developed and promoted the discourse of a "war on youth" as a part of grassroots organizing focused on challenging punitive policies introduced as solutions to "youth violence" and working toward the implementation of public policies that reflect social justice.

Finally, I argue that youths' development and promotion of critical understandings of youth and violence constitute epistemic resistance, a concept I theorized based on this research. I define epistemic resistance as process of developing and promoting

knowledge including analysis, discourses and ideologies that shift the ideological landscape and build ideological power. This concept helps us to understand why revising ideas about youth and violence is so central to the development of visions and strategies for youth safety and justice. The concept of epistemic resistance also suggests that changing the ideological and cultural landscape requires praxis, the integration of analysis and action.

### *Discussion of Key Findings and Further Questions*

Concealed and counter-stories advanced by young hip hop artists challenge three central stock stories of youth and violence circulating in the 1980s and 1990s. First, the news media often told the story that “ghetto youth” and particularly Black boys and young men, were the primary perpetrators of violence. For example in 1978, ABC aired a television documentary called *Youth Terror: The View From Behind the Gun* (1978), in which the main story line was that Black and Latino boys in urban ghettos were violent, out-of-control, and terrorizing society. Youths’ narratives expressed through hip hop countered that police officers and politicians were the primary perpetrators of violence in the form of continual harassment, brutality, as well as economic violence that deprived youth and their families of the resources they needed to survive. Rapper Melle Mel told such a story in “The Message,” released in 1982. Ice T’s song, “Killers,” released in 1984, also counters the stock story of young Black men as the primary perpetrators of violence. His song tells the story of several different killers – including a police officer, a wealthy young woman, a Vietnam veteran, a governor, a store owner, and the federal government. None of the killers or

acts of killing described in his song reflects the stock narrative of Black male violence.

Secondly, stock stories of youth and violence in the 1980s and 1990s expressed that young people were delinquent deviants and drains on society who should be incarcerated and killed at worst or abandoned by society at best. For example, in 1989, drug czar William Bennett, said that beheading drug dealers would be a moral solution to the “crack scare” of the 1980s and early 1990s. This stock story reduced youth and other members of Black working-class communities to subhuman status. In contrast, concealed stories told by young people through hip hop expressed that all members of their communities were fully human and deserved to be valued and treated with compassion, respect and dignity. M.C. Lyte shared this concealed story in her song, “I Cram to Understand You (Sam),” released in 1987, in which she asserts that Sam is complex person, who she seeks to understand rather than reduce, define, or disregard. Another example is Tupac’s song, “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” released in 1991, in which he shares how a Black teenage girl became pregnant as the result of sexual abuse and how society’s failure to assist the teenager led to her death.

Thirdly, stock stories of youth and violence shared that Black youth were violent toward each other because they have an aggressive and predatory mentality or are trapped in a culture in which their only choices are to abuse others or be abused. Elijah Anderson’s account of the code of the street first published in 1996, reflects this stock story, which centered on Black boys and young Black men, but also implicated Black girls and young Black women. Concealed and counter-narratives that young people shared through hip hop explained multiple factors for youths’

commission of violence against one another, including emotional trauma and peer pressure. The narratives of young men often asserted that they were not confined in a subculture that forced them to commit violence, but confined in a socio-economic landscape that offered them few options for survival outside of participation in a violent drug economy. Lastly, young hip hop artists expressed that even in the face of these structural restraints, they have agency and can collectively resist and transform their conditions. Tupac's song, "Me Against This World," released in 1995, encompasses these narrative elements. In another song, "Lord Knows," Tupac tells a concealed story of trauma, healing and resistance in which he shares that he often hurts so bad inside that he wants to kill himself, but uses drugs and alcohol to numb the pain and keep himself alive.

The resistance stories of youth organizers that I shared in chapter three provide lessons on the discourses and social change practices that youth have employed to advance critical understandings of violence. Young people have conducted research on youth, media, and criminalization to challenge the portrayals of youth of color as violent criminals in the newspaper, television news, and on popular entertainment radio. Their analysis established a direct connection between the criminalization of youth in the media and the development of punitive policies and practices that targeted youth of color. In asserting that young people "live and die on the words of experts and reporters," these youth organizers also demonstrated their understanding of epistemic violence and showed that their media justice research and activism is a form of youth-centered anti-violence praxis.

Similarly, youth organizers in Washington, D.C. developed and employed the “war on youth” discourse to show how social and economic abandonment and punitive policies constituted violence against them. In organizing against punitive policies and restrictive understandings on youth and violence using the slogan, “Stop the War on D.C. Youth!,” they expressed that their efforts were challenges to anti-youth violence.

The concealed, counter- and resistance stories that I discussed within this dissertation enrich our understanding of the concept of *epistemic violence*, the use of knowledge and power to inflict harm and injury on marginalized groups. It also reveals criminalization as a form of epistemic violence. Young people have identified journalists, politicians, and social scientists as lead perpetrators of epistemic violence against youth of color. This dissertation also contributes the concept of *epistemic resistance*, which refers to how the production and promotion of knowledge is used as a strategy to fight back against oppression and build ideological power. As the hip hop artists and youth organizers that I have discussed illustrate, epistemic resistance not only entails the development of analysis and discourses, but the intentional and widespread promotion of analysis and discourses through individual and collective action. Epistemic resistance is thus a form of praxis, in which analysis and action are wedded together to continually influence and inform ideologies and practices. The concept of epistemic resistance also allows us to further conceptualize how advancing analysis, ideologies and discourses in the public sphere can contribute to social and cultural change. My discussion illustrates that epistemic resistance entails a great deal of work beyond the development and documentation of research and analysis. It can entail meeting and negotiating with the leaders of the corporations and institutions



that were analyzed in research; making new discourses accessible and pervasive through the creation of propaganda; and mobilizing people behind visions of the change you seek. At its best, epistemic resistance is also collective resistance and thus achieved through collective processes of knowledge development and action.

My research also suggests areas in which youths' analyses, discourses and practices need further development. Young hip hop artists and youth organizers have contributed critical analyses on the intersectionality of violence. However, their analysis needs to reflect a more holistic understanding of violence against youth. The narratives and discourses that I have discussed in this dissertation discuss economic, epistemic, structural, and state violence, and how these kinds of violence intersect to harm or facilitate acts of harm and injury by and against young people. While this analysis is intersectional in its treatment of violence, it is not intersectional in its treatment of identity and oppression. For instance, the stories of hip hop artists and youth organizers that I have described clearly show how white supremacy, capitalism, and adultism manifest as violence in the lives of young people. The "War on Youth" discourse encapsulates this perspective. Most stories also center young Black men as the primary victims of the War on Youth.

How does the War on Youth impact young women? How does it impact queer youth? How does it impact young people with physical and cognitive disabilities? Where are the critical analysis and discourses on youth and violence that address how patriarchy, homophobia, and ableism, intersect with white supremacy, adultism, and capitalism, and manifest as violence against youth? Counter-narratives and concealed stories easily become stock stories that marginalize and erase. Where are the

concealed and counter-stories of young people of color who are more vulnerable to interpersonal and institutional victimization because of their gender, gender performance, sexuality, and disability? How have these youth developed concealed and counter-narratives that address the stock stories shared within cultural activism and community organizing? These are some of the questions that this dissertation does not adequately address. In addition, what are existing strategies for challenging violence against youth in all its forms? How is cultural activism and grassroots organizing used to develop and promote these strategies? I plan to continue to address these questions in conjunction with the youth and adults I work alongside in the Visions to Peace Project.

### *Visionary Anti-Violence Praxis*

In 2007, I founded the Visions to Peace Project, a youth leadership and movement-building project, with a vision of engaging youth, organizations, and communities in working for safety and peace outside of the criminal legal system by challenging all forms of violence that impact youth, particularly Black youth in working-class and middle-class communities. One of the primary ways in which we have developed our own analysis is by learning from and connecting with other organizations that are also working to challenge violence outside of the criminal legal system and that are led by people who continue to be marginalized within anti-prison and anti-violence movements. These experiences have not only helped us to develop a more holistic analysis of violence against youth, but have also challenged us to create an organizational space in which youth and adults will not face harassment and

violence because of their gender, sexuality, disability, history of arrest or incarceration, or involvement in activities such as the drug economy or sex trade.

In April 2008, two youth members and I traveled to New York to attend a Safe Neighborhood Summit organized by the The Safe OUTside the System (S.O.S.) Collective, a project of the Audre Lorde Project. This collective “works to challenge hate and police violence against LGBTSTGNC (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two-Spirit, Trans, and Gender Non Conforming) People of Color” and “build stronger community relationships to prevent, intervene, and reduce violence without relying on law enforcement.” The collective began in 1997 as a working group on police and state violence. They later shifted the center of their work from challenging police and state violence against LGBTSTGNC people of color to focusing on strategies that can simultaneously challenge police violence, repressive policies, and street violence directed against them. The first major effort of their Safe Neighborhood Campaign is to engage and train community institutions to serve as alternatives to the criminal legal system. According to a flyer distributed at their Summit: “We’re currently inviting organizations, businesses, religious institutions, and schools to become “Safe Spaces” which pledge to intervene in and prevent harassment or violence on their premises.” The Safe OUTSide the System Safe Neighborhood Summit brought people together who were interested in learning more about this process or becoming involved in the campaign.

The Summit also included a workshop on individual and group strategies for intervening and violence, and a workshop on ways to avoid police violence if you have to call the police. Organizers also provided space throughout the day for the

collection and sharing of stories of police and street violence committed against LGBTSTGNC people of color. One story that was shared through an artistic healing ritual was the story of Sanesha Stewart, a young Black transwoman who was stabbed to death in her apartment in New York two months before the summit took place. Mainstream queer activist organizations often respond to this kind of violence with calls for hate crime legislation that would enhance the punishments and lengthen the prison sentences for people who commit homophobic violence. The Safe OUTside the System Collective does not support these responses, arguing that strategies used to grow a violent system do not make them safer. Their alternative strategies involve healing, education and awareness, coalition-building, intervention, self-defense and cultural transformation.

In July 2009, four youth members and two adult staff of the Visions the Project (including myself) traveled to Detroit, Michigan to attend the Allied Media Conference, an annual gathering of alternative media makers and social justice organizers of all ages. While there, we connected with additional organizations who define themselves as part of a growing movement for community accountability and transformative justice. One of these groups was the Young Women’s Empowerment Project (YWEP), an organization of young women in Chicago, Illinois with experience in the sex trade and underground street economy. In the organization’s own words,

“Our goal is to build a movement amongst girls, including transgender girls, and young women, including trans women who trade sex for money, are trafficked or pimped and who are actively or formerly involved in the street economy. We are activists, artists, mothers, teachers, and visionaries—our vision for social justice is a world where we can be all of these things, all the time.

At the Allied Media Conference, YWEP presented the findings of their recent research study, “Girls do what they have to do to survive: Illuminating Methods used by Girls in the Sex Trade and Street Economy to Fight Back and Heal – A Participatory Action Research Study on Resistance and Resilience.” The study conducted by YWEP members over an 18 month period, shares how young women involved in the sex trade and street economy experience a range of individual and institutional forms of violence, including rape by johns and police officers as well as rejections for assistance by nonprofit organizations and social service providers. Their report illuminates the individual and collective strategies that young women use to heal from and challenge this violence. Members of YWEP shared that they decided to conduct their own research partly because they were fed up with how existing research represented young women in the sex trade and their experiences of victimization. In the introduction to their report, YWEP members declare:

This research is for US. It’s for YOU and for all girls, including transgender girls, and young women, including trans women involved in the sex trade and street economy. This research study was created by girls, collected by girls, and analyzed by girls. We did this because this is OUR LIVES. Who knows us better than us? We did this to prove that we care--that we are capable of resisting violence in a multitude of ways. We take care of ourselves and heal in whatever way feels best for us—whether society approves of it or not. This research study honors all of the ways we fight back (resistance) and our healing (resilience) methods. We proved that we do face violence but we are not purely victims. We are survivors. We can take care of ourselves and we know what we need. This research is a response to all of those researchers, doctors, government officials, social workers, therapists, journalists, foster care workers and every other adult who said we were too messed up or that we needed to be saved from ourselves.

YWEP also conducted their own research as the foundation for an organizing campaign that they are launching focusing on supporting young women in the sex trade and street economy in working for safety and social justice. They have created a

toolkit based on their research in which they shared the tools, tactics and resources that their research participants have used to keep themselves safer, help them heal, or helped them to challenge violence. The work of groups such as the Audre Lorde Project's Safe OUTside the System Collective and the Young Women's Empowerment Project illuminate stories of violence against youth who have no choice but to look outside the system for safety. They also show how youth and adults are working together from these interstitial spaces to develop innovative and transformative practices for safety and justice that will benefit all of society.

### *Further Reflections*

I very much believe in what Makani Themba Nixon says about the need to lift up the "hows." One of my favorite reminders of this is her statement, which I have taped up next to the computer and table where I write: "It is not giving people information that's key to motivating them to act, but validating their perceptions and conveying a sense that the change they dare to imagine in these private places is achievable and desired by a great many others." The stories of organizations working for transformative justice and community-based solutions to violence against youth embody the vision that I held when I started this project, but that I fear I did not adequately address in this work. This is a vision and a belief that we can create safety and social justice without policing and prisons. In order to do this, we have to talk about all of the violence that exists – even the violence that we have been afraid to discuss because people use it to criminalize our communities. We also have to talk

about the conditions that lead to violence against young people and communities at large, and how we can transform these conditions.

This means, of course, that we have to return to talking about culture. Too many of us in academia and some of us who are also organizers have allowed the misguided discourse of a “culture of poverty” to scare us away from talking about culture and cultural change within our analysis and discussions of violence. But cultural change is the change that we need to transform ourselves, our communities and societies at large; cultural change is what it will take to end all forms of violence. Culture, of course, is not simply behavior, as some scholars have tried to persuade is. Rather, culture is the values we hold, how we see ourselves and how we see and value other people in our society. It is our shared beliefs, commitments, and priorities; the stories that we tell each other and believe in; and the vision that we have of how we want to live in this world together. When we consider this definition of culture, it is easy to see that transforming the structures that impact our communities and that exist within our communities and transforming our own values, behavior and efforts – must be rooted in a process of holistic cultural transformation.

For me, another central “how” question revolves around the roles and practices of socially engaged scholars. My vision of socially engaged scholarship is a scholarship of praxis. Community organizations often employ scholars to work alongside members of marginalized communities to collectively create analysis and strategies for personal and social transformation. They also nurture scholars to advance individual and collective analysis and strategies in popular and transformative ways. The scholars that work at these institutions are also community

organizers, artists, cultural workers, counselors, and service providers. Most do not have PhDs; many do not have college degrees; and some do not have high school degrees. I believe that academically trained scholars with advanced degrees can also work within and contribute to these community-based institutions that reflect a commitment to transformative and collective praxis. Indeed, many do. I also believe that it is possible for academic institutions to support transformative and collective praxis as well. In fact, I have an example.

The Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research is a research center at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg in South Africa. The center, whose full name is the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research, is based out of the university's School for Religion and Theology. The Ujamaa Center describes itself as a "an interface between socially engaged biblical and theological scholars, organic intellectuals, and local communities of the poor, working-class, and marginalised." The Centre's core purpose is to "mobilise, train, support and empower the poor, the working-class, and the marginalized," particularly "women, youth, people living with HIV/AIDS, and the unemployed" using Biblical and theological resources for personal and social transformation. This work occurs through seven programs, which are coordinated and led by the Ujamaa's Centre's staff. For example, in their Research and Pedagogy Program, Ujamaa Centre staff develop pedagogical resources such as participatory workshops that use Biblical texts to facilitate collective reflection and action on social and political issues including sexual violence against women, the social status of people with HIV and AIDS, and the economic disenfranchisement of youth.



According to the Ujamaa Centre web site, “[The Research and Pedagogy] programme addresses the issue of praxis....a term which is used to claim that there should be an integral relationship between action and reflection. Praxis claims that action and reflection are two parts of a single process, and that all transformative work must include both. Without action, reflection is sterile, and without reflection, action is reaction. Praxis requires an ongoing relationship between action and reflection, enhancing our work in the Ujamaa Centre. The Research and Pedagogy Programme nurtures this praxis process.” Other Ujamaa Centre programs also reflect this commitment to praxis and utilize the resources developed by the Research and Pedagogy Program to facilitate collective analysis and learning as well as the planning and implementation of social action projects in marginalized communities. This work, in turn, impacts and often changes the content of their research and pedagogy. The Ujamaa Center models a deliberate, ongoing and simultaneous process of analysis, reflection and action for personal and social transformation. When academic institutions provide infrastructure and resources to community development in this way, they wholly commit themselves to a praxis that not only benefits marginalized communities, but everyone involved. This praxis also provides additional models for supporting and engaging in visionary work for personal and social transformation.

### *Contributions*

This dissertation illuminates youths’ agency in advancing critical understandings of violence contesting dominant discourses and stories. Secondly, it suggests ways in which academic scholars can engage in epistemic resistance with

young people. Promoting the research and critical analysis that young people have produced is one example. Thirdly, this study provides a re-theorized framing of and knowledge about the intellect and agency of marginalized youth. Rather than position youth as the object of studies on violence, it looks to youth as analysts, intellectuals, activists, and visionaries who have their own perspectives, analysis and ideologies on issues of violence, criminalization and safety. This study also makes specific contributions to a number of interdisciplines and fields. It expands American Studies scholarship on identity, oppression and resistance by foregrounding generation and adultism as significant yet often overlooked dimensions within intersectional analysis. It contributes to Black Studies and Ethnic Studies scholarship similarly, providing an example of scholarship on young people of color that avoids framing youth as problems and centers the agency- and activism-centric approaches that were foundational to both Black and Ethnic Studies. This research also provides youth studies scholars with conceptual and methodological approaches for future scholarship on youth, violence, and safety. Lastly, this dissertation can inform the development of urban youth policy and grassroots organizing for transformative justice, a vision of attaining safety and justice through personal and social transformation, rather than reliance on the criminal legal system. For example, it provides strategies for understanding and communicating about violence in such a way that we can understand and communicate about the need to challenge the criminalization and incarceration of Black youth and other young people of color while simultaneously working for safety.

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